



Graduate employability: “the market is still hot!”

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Demand for planners is high. The industry’s high job vacancy rate is causing employers to rethink their needs and their approach to recruitment. But what does this mean for young planners just starting their careers? I asked this question to students and employers to find out more.

Lauren Daly, a second-year student in the Bachelor of Planning at Macquarie University, has recently secured a role as a student planner at a local council. After applying for seven jobs in a two-month period, she was offered a one-year full-time role. Lauren is part of a growing trend in the planning industry where students are opting to work in planning while studying instead of continuing in a casual retail or hospitality job to support their studies—a common arrangement amongst university students across all disciplines of study. They are, it seems, entering the workforce earlier on in their studies. This option is becoming increasingly available due to the current shortage of planners.

A word from industry

Getting in early is a strategy adopted by planning consultancies as well. Private firms have learnt from experience that for them to secure graduate planners, they need to employ them as student planners first and then work to retain them. The recruitment process has moved earlier and earlier in the year to secure the best candidates. An Executive Director from a private firm that employs up to four students every year explains that their ongoing yearly program results in approximately 80 per cent retention of students into ongoing roles after graduation and many of them will typically stay with the company for years afterwards.

Councils, which in years gone by have been the traditional training ground for student planners and graduates, are now struggling to secure a young, high-quality workforce. Unable to act as quickly as the private sector, however, councils are increasingly losing out to private consulting firms, which have become influential players in this space in recent years.

Graduates in the workplace

Speaking with students who either have



Figure 1: Image of planning students actively learning at Macquarie University (Source: author, 2022)

recently graduated or are just about to, it is clear that there is a widespread hunger amongst them to be employed as soon as possible. A common strategy for succeeding in being offered a job was to be adaptable in the type of role, the organisation and the location.

Lauren Carter will complete her Bachelor of Planning degree at the end of this year. She has been working at a private consultancy since January in a student planner role. Lauren worked hard at finding a position, applying for multiple jobs and attending many interviews from when she was in her third year. Although Lauren had initially thought her first job would be in local government, she has fallen in love with her current role as she is gaining a variety of experiences in a supportive workplace. Lauren approached the task of looking for work with an open mind and determination. Her advice to other graduates and soon-to-be graduates: “it might be hard to land that first job but don’t give up!”

Preparing students for placement

Associate Professor Kate Lloyd¹ convenes the work placement unit in the Bachelor of Planning at Macquarie University (as shown in Figure 1 above). Kate’s teaching focuses on practice-based learning with an applied, action-oriented approach. Kate has noticed significant changes in the three years she has convened this unit, with COVID-19 being the primary contributor, noting the following:

“*Students obtain their first position through a diversity of sources, such as job websites, University relationships with the planning and development industry, and, interestingly, informal social networks with family and friends.*”

2022 has generally been relatively easier for students to land a job. Kate indicates that the increasingly common direction is for students to secure employment earlier in their degree. The trend for second-year students looking for and obtaining positions is also growing.

The possibilities for planners entering the workplace in the future are out there for the taking, so students should capitalise on these. A prominent experienced planner said to me when discussing the supply of planners, “the market is still hot!” ■

Linda Kelly MPIA is a lecturer in planning at Macquarie University. Linda has over 30 years of experience working as a planner in numerous Sydney metropolitan councils before becoming an academic. With her extensive experience, Linda facilitates practice-oriented learning for her students, who are at the centre of her teaching.

Endnotes

¹ See: <https://researchers.mq.edu.au/en/persons/kate-lloyd>