# FINDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

As a student, your time will likely be split in a number of directions – studying, leisure and domestic life, and perhaps employment. As such, the opportunities to develop your skills might come from all of these ‘locations’.

What are you going to be doing when you’re not in class? And your university experience has to be about more than learning information: it is also about broader personal development, right? These are two important questions.

Some ideas to help you answer the first question are given below. The answer to the second would seem to be an obvious ‘yes’, but it is not quite that simple. For example, the older we get, the more diverse our own personal development needs become and the less a typical university experience will be able to meet such needs. But if you are just starting university – whether as a UK student or an international student – your university experience has the potential to give you a fantastic opportunity to practise, develop and become proficient in a wide range of skills and abilities. But that is before we even mention various opportunities to travel and study overseas, meet people from countries you may know little about (Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Ghana, etc.) and get involved in activities and hobbies that you’ve always wanted to try. We’ll not talk too much here about part-time work although it will feature a great deal in subsequent content, but wewill go through some of the opportunities that you will probably get at university to develop yourself and your view of the world.

## Your Student Union

Without a shadow of doubt, the best opportunities for your development by far will come from activities organised through the Student Union. Whether it is helping to lead a university radio station or becoming a member of the hockey club, your student union can give you an opportunity to do something new, something you’ve done before in a new location, or something you’ve done before but this time ‘at a higher level’ – i.e. to learn to take responsibility for leading, organising or managing activities and people.

Most student unions are affiliated to the National Union of Students and can provide access to resources for social activities (student radio, photographic society), sometimes for free, sometimes for a small fee. Nearly all will include sports associations of various kinds.

The value of the Student Union for the development of skills cannot be understated. The chances that they provide for taking leadership, for showing initiative and for demonstrating a wide variety of skills highly sought by employers are otherwise very difficult to obtain, and employers often highly value a student’s involvement in such activities for two main reasons:

1. There is no monetary incentive attached to doing such activities, and so getting involved can reveal a student’s desire to do things for their own benefit, not because they have to do so or are forced to.
2. Financial and other pressures mean that fewer and fewer students take the time to get involved in voluntary activities, whilst there is increased competition for paid employment.

Student union activities will give you the chance *to* get involved in many of the activities listed below, so take the chance to get involved and make the most of the opportunities to lead and organise activities. You don’t have to be power hungry or ambitious to join: it is just great to do so in order to have a rich and varied university experience.

But what about part-time work? Does it have *any* value?

## Part-Time Work

Many of the skills development opportunities listed at the end of the following chapters relate to responsibilities in the workplace. Certainly there’s no doubt about this: having work experience is seen as important by employers, and when you come to apply for full-time jobs and try to start your career after your degree, a candidate who has work experience will probably be considered above someone who has done little except study for the past few years. However work experience comes in different forms – and sometimes the benefits can be outweighed by negative impacts, as we’ll see.

The practicalities work out like this. Much student work experience is in bars, restaurants, shops, supermarkets and in what is called ‘the service sector’ of the economy, although some can be found in factories and some in call centres. The pay is not great but generally okay, and traditionally most of the work will be in the evenings and at weekends. Such work has typically involved little training, been unskilled or semi-skilled, and has brought with it little responsibility. This is a massive stereotype, and there are a large number of exceptions (many students work in family businesses, some become self-employed, and some may be able to continue in a skilled job with a level of responsibility that they had before starting their studies), but nevertheless the idea of a typical student job with no responsibility and little need for much skill has some truth behind it.

So, back to the original question – what value does such work have? The most obvious is financial. The money earned from such jobs is (as I said before) not very much, but it will provide some funding which can prove extremely valuable to some students, and it is much better to have some work experience than to have nothing in your life except studying. But from an employer’s perspective, there are some longer-term advantages to the development of your own personal skills as well:

1. Many – if not all – jobs will involve a level of team-working of some kind, and require you to communicate and work with others to complete tasks.
2. There will usually be a requirement to turn up on time and manage that time.
3. Some jobs will need you to demonstrate how resourceful you are.
4. Many future graduate jobs (especially those on management trainee schemes) will need you to demonstrate some commercial awareness: part-time work experience is one way to gain an understanding of this.

Not everyone sees it this way however. Some of your lecturers will see excessive work experience as interfering with your studies (especially as more and more part-time work is taking place during daytime throughout the week) and will have a very strong view which says that studying should come first and that no allowance will be made for obligations from an employer. You have a precious opportunity to study at university, and since the fees you pay are higher than ever before, you should do everything you can to ensure you pass your courses, for the sake of personal finances as much as for other reasons. Therefore, many universities will set a limit on the amount of part-time working that should be done during a degree: some universities suggest that 20 hours of part-time work is a reasonable maximum. For international students from outside the EU, the UK government imposes a limit of 20 hours working per week as a condition of their visas.

So when does work experience have some value? Put simply, work experience has value when it gives you the opportunity to do more than is mentioned in the four bullet points above. It has value not only when you are able to be a member of a team, but also when you are able to lead that team and take some responsibility for making decisions. The more involvement you have in making decisions about the team, the task and the individuals within the team, the more evidence you will be able to give a future employer.

The same goes for the other qualities you might be able to show an employer via your work experience: any job that can give you the opportunity to demonstrate the skills in the box below will be a useful job to have (as long as the working hours do not interfere with the time you should be spending studying).

**Activities you could usefully seek from work experience (or student union societies)**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Leading others  Accepting responsibility – for money or people  Training/teaching others  Chairing a meeting  Conducting an investigation  Giving feedback to other staff on their performance | Delivering a presentation  Recommending (and better still implementing) some ideas to improve the workplace  Working on your own initiative  Handling a budget  Developing a plan  Organising staff activities (social or professional) |

The key words in this box are the verbs. What you ‘organise’, ‘develop’, ‘lead’, ‘deliver’, ‘implement’ and so on is much less important than the fact that you have had the experience of doing so successfully – we’ll return to this point much later on when we come to talk about CVs (see Chapter 16).

## Domestic Activities

For some students (or their classmates) much of their time will be spent at home looking after things domestically. This might mean what seem to be simple activities, such as handling shopping, arranging to pick up brothers or sisters from school, or simply planning and cooking meals. Whilst employment or social activities at university are seen by many as ‘higher profile’ or ‘more significant’ in terms of their ability to generate evidence of skills, the role(s) students have in the home should not be ignored. Many of the students I have taught have become interested in teaching – for example, having spent time looking after relatives’ children.

There are a number of skills that can be demonstrated through domestic activities (see the box below).

**Tasks demonstrated through domestic activities**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Activity* | *Skill Potentially Developed* |
| Handling Finance | Budgeting  Planning  Handling/accepting responsibility |
| Managing a Busy Day | Time management  Planning and organising |
| Organising Holidays | Planning  Budgeting  Creativity  Problem solving |
| Looking after Children | Managing behaviour  Planning activities  Resourcefulness  Problem solving |

There are number of reasons why these activities are sometimes seen as ‘less important’ than work experience or having responsibility – they might *have to be done* so there could be little to say about motivation; they don’t always involve other people, so there is less to write about communication skills or demonstrate any skills relating to your ability to work with others. However, this does not mean that you cannot use such situations to develop some of the skills which will be useful for employment.

## University-Organised Voluntary Activities

### Community volunteering

Many universities and student unions will offer opportunities to become involved in what might be called ‘social action’ projects, to assist the local community in different ways. You might like to get involved in such activities for social or environmental reasons, but – like any activity you undertake anywhere – they can be good for developing your skills generally.

### School mentoring

As with the above idea, many universities offer the chance to get involved in assisting in classrooms at local schools. If you have any thoughts about getting into teaching after your degree, then you should strongly consider gaining some classroom experience as early as possible.

### University mentoring

The idea here is similar, although it relates more to your own situation as a mentee than offering any mentoring experience. How does it work? Simple: usually a second- or final-year student would give you advice and assistance in your studies in order to help you do well. This advice might be with regard to understanding university life, how to manage your time or how to do well in assessments. Any work you do, however, has to be your own, of course.

**Take advantage of as many opportunities as possible for developing your skills in the ways shown above, and you may be better than others when it comes to performing well in academic life and in getting that first job.**

## Tools for Assisting Personal Skill Development

The final section of this chapter covers a number of ‘tools’ which might be useful to you in developing your skills

### Personal tutors

Most universities will give you a personal tutor. Their specific role varies from university to university, but in general it is often to provide a central signposting role so they can direct you to sources of support which can fit any needs you have as a learner. However, it is important to develop good relations with such individuals: they will often be the people who will write references for you when you come to leave the university, and if the only time they have seen you is when you need something from them, they are unlikely to be particularly happy about doing so.

They will usually have a clear and distinct role in speaking up for students during exam time, especially if something has gone wrong in the assessment process – again a good reason for getting to know them during the year.

### Peer mentors

Some universities also have peer mentors – especially for new students starting their university studies. These are usually students a year ahead of you, who can provide some advice and comment about being a student, and doing well in assessments. They will usually have had some training and may (in some cases) be employed by the university to help you.

**Whilst planning for the future can significantly help you understand which skills you need, acting on the opportunities given and ones you can take yourself will help you develop those skills both for university life and beyond.**