

Programmed to Succeed

University is over. What's next? Margaret Langdon investigates graduate programs.

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You've worked hard towards your degree and the end is in sight. But now what? After many years in one school after another, the world beyond the university walls can seem daunting. How can you get your shiny new career off to a flying start?

Many organisations offer structured training programs to encourage new graduates to join their ranks. Graduate programs focus on career development and often include a job rotation program to provide experience in different aspects of the company.

Dr Noel Edge, executive director of Graduate Careers Australia (GCA), a leading authority on graduate employment issues, says the programs are a great opportunity to keep learning.

"They really give graduates the chance to expand and extend their education," says Edge. "The programs are almost an extension of the university environment but in a sort of internship mode. They're an important add-on in terms of career development."

Don't be put off by the thought of further training after all those years at school. A graduate position should include real responsibilities and work on major projects, and the best thing is that you'll be getting paid to do it. Some graduate programs even include international postings.

What's the difference between joining a company through a graduate program and just applying for a job? The answer lies in the career development aspect. Instead of being locked into a single defined position, the graduate program allows you to explore various roles within the company and gives you an overview of how the business operates.

"If you simply get a job, you're in charge of your own career development," Edge explains. "But if you get a graduate position the program is laid out for you and you get an excellent start in developing things like business skills, and how to work and communicate with people. These are the sorts of things employers are crying out for," he says.

There's a two-fold benefit to graduate programs. Not only does the graduate get to know the company, and develop a feel for what role might suit them best, but the employer is able to assess the graduate as well, and work out what might be their best fit in a business sense. It's a win-win situation which makes good economic sense to employers.

Over 100 public and private sector organisations offer graduate programs every year. Details are listed in GCA's annual directory Graduate Opportunities which is available from tertiary careers services departments, careers fairs or from www.graduateopportunities.com. Companies offering graduate programs will have details on their own websites.

It's wise to plan ahead and start researching graduate programs well before the end of your degree. A lot of the organisations do their recruiting for graduate programs in the early part of the graduate's final year.

Of course, the graduate positions at the top companies are in demand and competition can be fierce. While a large organisation make take on what seems like a lot of graduates – perhaps 50 or so – they may have received thousands of applications for these sought-after positions. It puts the big-name companies into the enviable position of being able to take their pick of quality graduates.

It's not so enviable, however, to be one of the many applicants who miss out on their dream position. Graduates need to be resilient and be aware that they're not necessarily going to get the first position they apply for, Edge advises.

"This is one of life's first hard lessons," he says. "You're out there competing with thousands of students with the same qualifications and expectations as you. Many students do get disappointed when they miss out, but you need to understand it's a highly competitive business. It's not a personal rejection. You need to keep trying."

What is a graduate program?

A graduate program is a structured professional development role designed specifically for recent graduates. You can apply within one or two years of finishing your degree.

The benefits include a supportive environment, an opportunity to work in a number of roles in a rotational schedule, on-the-job training and mentoring, and a focus on learning and development.

Programs usually run from one to three years, and may include rotational or fixed roles within a specific department.

You'll be challenged and have to think on your feet in a range of professional environments, and you'll develop valuable skills that will kick-start your career.

These are some of the many organisations that offer graduate programs.

- > ALDI
- > Alium
- > AMP Services Limited
- > Australia Post
- > Australian Secret Intelligence Service
- > Baulderstone
- > Boyce Chartered Accountants
- > Centrelink
- > Clisco
- > Department of Defence
- > Deutsche Bank
- > Electralnet
- > Ernst & Young
- > ExxonMobil
- > Fulton Hogan
- > Harris Stratex Networks
- > Kellogg Brown & Root Pty Ltd (KBR)
- > Mars Australia
- > Medicare Australia
- > Meltwater Group
- > NAB
- > National Foods
- > Newcrest Mining
- > OneSteel
- > Optiver
- > Orion Health
- > Procter & Gamble
- > Protiviti
- > Reserve Bank of Australia
- > Santos
- > Shell Australia
- > Structerra Consulting Engineers
- > Theiss Pty Ltd
- > Water Corporation
- > Woodside

Check www.graduateopportunities.com or company websites for details of 2013 programs.

An open-minded approach to the companies and industries you may apply for is important. Since the big, well-known organisations will attract many applicants, why not consider smaller or lesser-known companies? Perhaps look beyond the supermarket shelves for non-consumer brands, or consider other industries entirely.

Working in a smaller company can have other advantages too. "You might be one of 50 graduates in a big organisation," Edge explains, "Whereas if you join a smaller organisation you might be one of only two. Your involvement then can be far more focused."

But how do you find these companies you may never have heard of? All tertiary institutions have careers services sections with expert staff who are a great resource for students, and Dr Edge stresses their importance.

"The onus is on the student to come and talk to these specialist staff. Many don't take advantage of the expertise that's there. It really is important to be able to connect to people who have experience to guide you through the process."

So the main things to remember as you line up on the starting blocks, ready for the race towards graduate positions, are to keep an open-minded approach, make use of available resources and keep trying. Persistence can pay off and the results will be worthwhile.

A graduate program is a great way for a young person to launch their career, Edge says. "It means they're able to hit the ground running."