



Placement Years and Sandwich Years

Everything you need to know
before you apply



What Is a Placement Year?

A placement year, also commonly called a sandwich year or sandwich placement, is a period of full-time paid work that students complete as part of their undergraduate degree. It typically takes place between the penultimate and final year of study, and usually lasts between nine and twelve months.

Some degree courses include a placement year as a built-in component, extending a three-year degree to four years. Others offer it as an option. Either way, the experience is the same: a full year working in industry, with real responsibilities, a real salary, and a real opportunity to develop the professional skills that set graduates apart.

This guide covers everything students need to know: what a placement year involves, why it is worth doing, how to apply, and how to make the most of it once you are there.

Step and Sandwich Placements

Step is a leading provider of sandwich placements and internships for students and graduates across the East Midlands and beyond. All Step placements are paid and project-focused, giving you a defined brief and something specific to achieve during your time. Visit www.step.org.uk to see current opportunities.



Why do a placement year?

A placement year is one of the most consistently valuable things a student can do to improve their graduate prospects. The benefits are practical, measurable, and long-lasting.

You Graduate With a Year of Real Experience

Most students finish their degree with academic qualifications and little else. A placement year changes that entirely. By the time you graduate, you will have a full year of professional experience to talk about, specific examples to use in interviews, and a demonstrable understanding of how a workplace actually operates.

Employers notice this immediately. More than a third of the UK's leading graduate recruiters have said that graduates with no previous work experience are unlikely to be successful in their selection processes. A placement year is the most direct way to avoid being in that position.

It Often Leads Directly to a Graduate Job

Many employers use placement years as an extended recruitment process. Students who perform well are frequently offered a place on the graduate scheme before they have even returned for their final year. According to the Institute of Student Employers, 44% of placement students return to their placement employer after graduating.

That is a significant advantage. Returning to your final year knowing you already have a graduate role secured changes the experience entirely, and it is an outcome that is genuinely common for students who make the most of their placement.

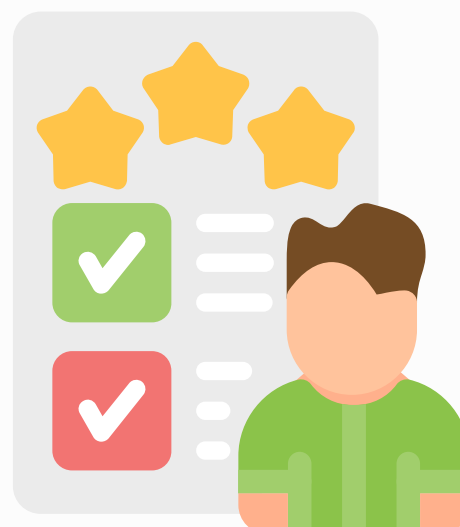
Think Of It as a Twelve-Month Interview

An employer can tell a lot about a candidate in an interview. They can tell far more over twelve months. Students who approach their placement year with that mindset, committing fully from the first day, are the ones who tend to convert it into a job offer.

Your Academic Performance Improves

Research consistently shows that students who complete a placement year achieve better degree results in their final year. The reasons are straightforward: you return to your studies with a clearer sense of why your subject matters, how the theory applies in practice, and what you actually want to do with it.

The skills you develop during a placement, including time management, communication, and the ability to work to real deadlines, also translate directly into better academic performance. Many students use their placement experience as the basis for their final year dissertation or major project.



You Build Commercial Awareness And Professional Skills

Commercial awareness is one of the qualities employers most consistently say graduates lack. It means understanding how a business operates, how decisions get made, what drives performance, and what success looks like in a real organisation. You cannot develop this from a lecture hall. A placement year gives you direct exposure to it every day.

The professional skills you develop are equally valuable: how to manage your time without a timetable, how to communicate in a workplace, how to contribute in a team working to real deadlines, and how to handle feedback. These are the skills that make the transition from study to employment straightforward rather than difficult.

You Build a Professional Network

Every colleague, manager, client, and contact you meet during your placement is a potential part of your professional network for years to come. These relationships can lead directly to job opportunities, references, introductions, and advice that would not be available to graduates who went straight from university into the job market.

Make it a deliberate part of your placement to build those relationships. Connect with people on LinkedIn during your time there, not just at the end. Stay in touch after you leave. A network built during a placement year compounds in value throughout a career.

You Find Out What You Actually Want To Do

Many students are not entirely sure what they want to do when they finish their degree. A placement year is the most reliable way to find out. You might confirm that the career you had in mind is exactly right for you, or you might discover that it is not, and that something else suits you better. Either outcome is valuable. It is far better to find that out during your placement year than after committing to a graduate scheme or a job you are not suited to.

DO	AVOID
✓ Treating every day like a permanent employee would	✗ Treating it as temporary and holding something back
✓ Keeping notes on what you achieve throughout	✗ Waiting to be given tasks rather than showing initiative
✓ Asking for feedback at the midpoint, not just the end	✗ Staying only within your immediate team
✓ Networking across the organisation deliberately	✗ Leaving networking until your final weeks
✓ Connecting with contacts on LinkedIn as you meet them	✗ Assuming contacts will stay in touch without effort
✓ Asking about graduate opportunities before you leave	✗ Assuming a job offer will come without asking
✓ Using your experience as the basis for final year work	✗ Returning to final year without updating your CV

Practical Things You Need To Know

Are Placement Years Paid?

Most placement year students are paid, and many receive similar benefits to the company's graduate employees, including paid holiday. Typical salaries in 2026 ranged from around £18,000 to £27,000 per year, depending on the employer and the sector, with some larger organisations and engineering firms paying considerably more. It is worth knowing that current legislation means employers are not legally required to pay the national minimum wage if the placement is a mandatory part of a university course and lasts less than a year. In practice, most employers do pay. Step only works with employers who pay their placement students. Think of your placement year as an investment in yourself: the experience, the skills, and the professional network you build have a long-term value that goes well beyond the salary.

You will usually still be eligible for a reduced maintenance loan during your placement year. Tuition fees are also typically reduced, usually to around 15% to 20% of the standard rate. Your university will be able to confirm the specific figures, and it is worth checking this before you start your search.

Do You Need To Be On A Sandwich Degree Course?

Not necessarily. While sandwich degrees build the placement year directly into the course structure, many universities will allow students on standard three-year degrees to defer their final year and complete a placement in between. The best first step is to speak to your university's placement or careers team to find out what is possible for your course.

If your course does not offer a formal placement year, a graduate internship completed after finishing your degree is an alternative that offers many of the same benefits. Step works with both current students and recent graduates, so register your profile at www.step.org.uk regardless of where you are in your studies.

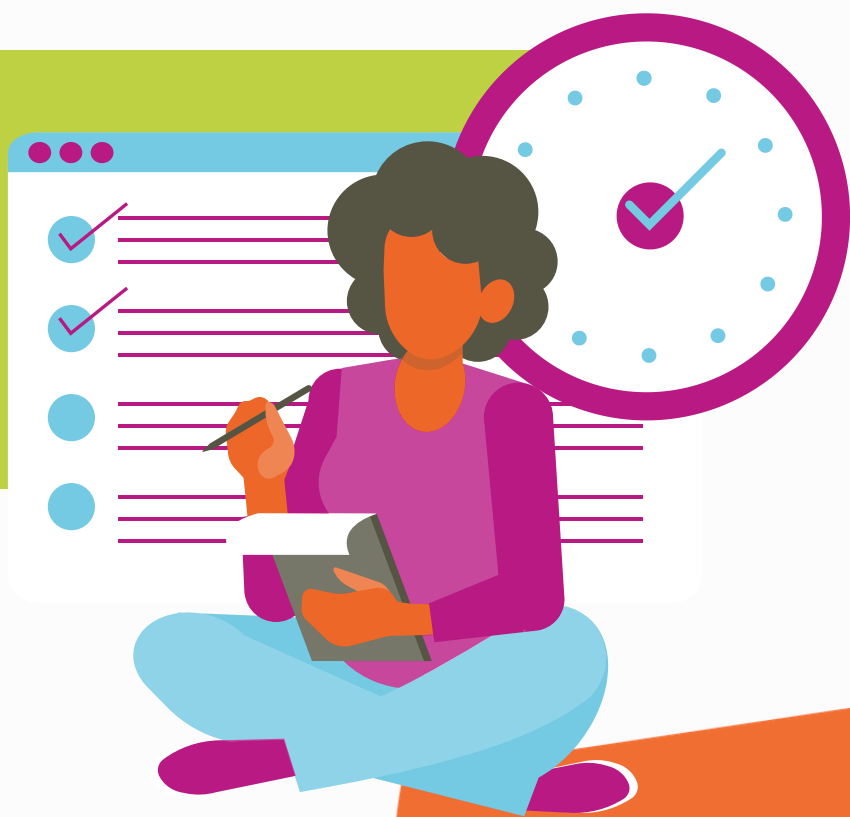
When Should You Start Applying?

Earlier than most students expect. The application process for placement years at larger employers typically opens in the autumn of your penultimate year, and deadlines can fall as early as November or December. Some roles close within weeks of opening.

Starting your search in September or October of your second year gives you the best chance of accessing the full range of opportunities. Leaving it until the spring term means many of the best roles will already be filled.

How Many Applications Should You Make?

Students who secure placement years through competitive employers typically apply to between 30 and 60 roles. The application process is time-consuming, but the volume is necessary because competition is high and rejection is a normal part of the process. Resilience matters as much as quality of application.



Where Do You Find Placement Year Opportunities?

Placement opportunities are advertised in a number of places, but the students who find the best roles are rarely the ones who rely on job boards alone. Start with the obvious sources and then go further.

- **Your university careers service and placement team.** This is always the first port of call. Many universities have established relationships with employers who recruit exclusively through them, and careers advisers can support you with applications, CV reviews, and mock interviews.
- **Job boards and placement-specific sites.** Step advertises paid, project-focused placements at www.step.org.uk. Other sites including Prospects, Targetjobs, and Higherin list placement opportunities across sectors.
- **LinkedIn.** Follow companies you are interested in and set up job alerts for placement and internship roles. Connect with current placement students at those companies and ask them about their experience. Recruiters also actively search LinkedIn for placement candidates, so make sure your profile is up to date and your Open to Work status reflects what you are looking for.
- **Networking and direct contact.** Do not wait for a role to be advertised. Many placement opportunities, particularly at smaller businesses, are never formally listed anywhere. Reach out directly to companies you want to work for, explain who you are, what you are studying, and that you are looking for a placement. Speak to family, friends, and university contacts about who they know. Attend careers fairs and employer events and make a point of having real conversations. A speculative approach takes more effort than applying to a job board listing, but it also has far less competition.

The students who find the best placements are often the ones who combine all of these approaches at once rather than working through them one at a time.

What Does The Application Process Involve?

The recruitment process for a placement year is usually similar to the employer's graduate recruitment process. For larger organisations, this typically involves an online application form, psychometric tests, a first-round interview, and an assessment centre. For smaller employers, it is often a CV and covering letter followed by one or two interviews.

In every case, employers want to see that you have researched the company specifically, that you have a genuine reason for wanting to work there, and that you can demonstrate the soft skills and early professional behaviours they are looking for in a placement student.

What If You Do Not Get A Placement?

It is not the end of your options. If your search for a placement year is not successful, there are practical alternatives worth pursuing:

- Summer internships during your second year, which typically last four to twelve weeks
- Shorter placements and project-based work experience arranged through your university
- Voluntary roles that develop transferable skills relevant to your target sector
- Part-time or temporary work in your chosen industry, even if not at graduate level

Any structured, meaningful experience is better than none. Graduates who have pursued these alternatives in place of a formal placement year can still build a compelling application for graduate roles, provided they can talk specifically about what they did and what they learned.

Making The Most Of Your Placement Year

Getting the placement is the first step. What you do during it determines how much benefit you actually take away.

Commit From Day One

The students who get the most from a placement year, including job offers at the end, are the ones who commit fully from the start. Attitude and effort are visible immediately, and the impression you make in your first few weeks tends to stick.

Turn up on time, take your responsibilities seriously, ask good questions, and approach every task as if it matters. It does. Your placement year is, in effect, a twelve-month extended interview.

Ask For Feedback Regularly

Do not wait until the end of your placement to find out how you are doing. Ask your line manager informally after your first month, and again at the halfway point. This shows you are invested in improving, and it gives you the chance to correct anything before it becomes a fixed impression.

Keep A Record Of Everything

One of the most common mistakes placement students make is leaving without being able to articulate what they actually did. Keep notes throughout: projects you worked on, problems you helped solve, results you contributed to, skills you developed. This material is invaluable when updating your CV, preparing for final year job applications, and asking for a reference.

Network Deliberately And Consistently

Your immediate team is not the only part of the organisation worth knowing. Ask to meet people in other departments. Attend company meetings or events you are invited to. Connect with colleagues on LinkedIn as you meet them, not just at the end.

The relationships you build during your placement year can lead directly to future opportunities, both within the same organisation and through referrals and recommendations from people who know your work.

Have An Honest Conversation About What Comes Next

If you are interested in returning to the organisation after graduation, say so. Have that conversation clearly and early enough for it to be meaningful. Do not assume your line manager knows you want to come back. A direct, well-timed conversation about your ambitions costs nothing and significantly increases the likelihood of a positive outcome.



Placement Year Checklist

Use this at each stage of your placement year to make sure you are getting the most from it.

Finding And Applying

- ☐ Started searching in September or October of your penultimate year
- ☐ Spoken to your university placement or careers team about options
- ☐ Applied to a broad range of roles across employers and sectors
- ☐ Researched each employer specifically before applying
- ☐ CV and covering letter reviewed and tailored for each application

During The Placement

- ☐ Treating every day with full professional commitment
- ☐ Keeping notes on projects, achievements, and skills developed
- ☐ Asking for feedback at the one-month and halfway points
- ☐ Networking deliberately across the organisation
- ☐ Connecting with colleagues on LinkedIn as you meet them

Before You Leave

- ☐ Had a direct conversation about returning after graduation
- ☐ Asked your manager for a reference or LinkedIn recommendation
- ☐ Updated your CV with specific achievements from the placement
- ☐ Final year dissertation or project topic considered in light of placement experience

Ready to find your placement year?

Step Recruitment is a leading provider of paid, project-focused sandwich placements for students across the East Midlands and beyond.

Register your profile today at www.step.org.uk

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