

Graduate Careers & Employment Research Prize 2006

“What to do, where to look and when to locate and act on career and employment opportunities whilst studying for the Bachelor of Health Science (Nutrition and Dietetics).”

Studying Nutrition and Dietetics at CSU, and wondering how to find a job at the end of it? This report aims to give some information on how to find a job, when and where to start looking, and how the course itself prepares you for employment.



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1. Introduction

Finding and securing employment is the aim of most university students. There is a wealth of information available on the internet and in other media to assist graduates to prepare for and find a job. Universities, including Charles Sturt University (CSU) also offer careers advisory services to students. This report does not aim to replace these services, but to compliment them by providing information specific to students of the Bachelor of Health Science (Nutrition and Dietetics). The information in this report aims to inform third and final year students of this degree about what to do to find a job in dietetics, including how the course structure itself assists students in preparing for the workplace, and the benefits of membership of the Dietitians Association of Australia. It also contains some information on where to look when seeking employment, with particular mention of working in rural areas of Australia. Finally, when to start preparing for and actively pursuing graduate positions is discussed, with an emphasis on early preparation for job seeking in the final year of study.

2. What To Do

2.1 Self Assessment

Self Assessment is an important part of finding and securing a job. Self assessment involves personally working out what the individual student has to offer a potential employer (Hastings 2001). This does not only involve a degree or an impressive transcript, but includes information about the attributes and skills that will make a better rounded employee, and therefore a more attractive and employable applicant. Throughout the course of the degree, many general skills are obtained, such as working independently and with others; meeting deadlines and so on (Hastings 2001). Many of these are listed in the subject outline of each subject as 'generic skills'. Self assessment may also involve listing skills obtained from personal interests or extra-curricular activities, such as club involvement or leadership positions, as well as part time work and work experience skills (Hastings 2001). Once a graduate knows what they can offer a potential employer, they will be better equipped to explain their skills, which will assist them in interviews and job applications.

2.2 Researching Career Paths and Networking

When planning a career it is important to know what the particular field of interest is, and to do some research into this field. Nutrition and dietetics has many career paths and specialisations, such as rural health, food industry positions, clinical work in a hospital or community health centre, media and government positions and more. These sectors may differ widely from each other and value different skills in their graduate employees (Hastings & Bryant 2001). To gain entry into any field it is useful to research career paths in that particular industry, as well as what skills or qualities the graduate will need to bring to an employer (Hastings & Bryant 2001). Tools are available to assist people in career planning and goal setting. One such tool is Career Navigator (www.careernavigator.com.au), which aims to help set career goals and form strategies to achieve them (Career Navigator 2003)

Networking- making contacts with people, particularly those in the dietetics or food industry- is an extremely important part of professional life. One of the advantages of having a relatively small class size is being able to know your classmates and lecturers, as well as students in senior years of the degree. These people may make

useful contacts when you begin your career. The placements performed by students in third and fourth year are also a useful means of networking students should take advantage of. Although a position may not be available in the facility that the placement took place in, placements allow students to become known in the community (S McAlpin, course coordinator, 2006, pers. comm., 1 March). Joining the Dietitians Association of Australia (discussed below) also gives students and graduates a helpful means of networking (DAA 2006).

2.3 Joining the Dietitian's Association of Australia (DAA)

Students of the Bachelor of Health Science (Nutrition and Dietetics) at CSU are now eligible for student membership of the DAA. There are numerous advantages to becoming a member, including networking with other dietitians, access to recent publications and resources, and access to the DAA website (DAA 2006). These benefits are not only advantageous during study, but for ongoing professional development. Many dietetics jobs that are advertised require membership of the DAA as a prerequisite for employment.

2.4 Preparing CV, interview skills, and other preparation while studying

The Bachelor of Health Science (nutrition and dietetics) at CSU is very useful in preparing its graduates for employment and securing a job. It has been planned with graduate opportunities in mind (S McAlpin, course coordinator, 2006, pers. comm., 1 March). Practical work experience is included in the course above the basic requirements of similar courses; for example, the third year placements and practical experience in the Nutrition Clinic on campus are not requirements for qualification, but are invaluable for giving students extra experience to be more competent in the workplace (S McAlpin, course coordinator, 2006, pers. comm., 1 March). In addition, placement supervisors may be suitable for use as a referee on a job application. Graduates seeking referees should consider people with whom they developed a good rapport, who will give positive feedback (S McAlpin, course coordinator, 2006, pers. comm., 1 March). All three dietetics lecturers at CSU may act as a referee, and may also act as a mentor in the accredited practicing dietitian professional development program for graduates (S McAlpin, course coordinator 2006, pers. comm., 1 March).

The fourth year of the course also includes a subject called 'Professional Issues in Nutrition and Dietetics' (NUT403). This subject teaches students about the dietitian's management of human resources, and includes assessments such as writing a professional CV and mock job interviews (S McAlpin, course coordinator, 2006, pers. comm., 1 March). These assessments are useful to the graduate, as the CV and interview skills are useful in the real life job market.

3. Where to Look

3.1 Recruitment/ Employment Agencies

There are many recruitment agencies for positions in Australia and overseas. They may be a valuable source of information on the job market in the area of choice. However, there is no specific recruitment agency that specialises in dietitians (S McAlpin, course coordinator, 2006, pers. comm., 1 March). There are also agencies that recruit Australians for overseas health professions. Some experience is required before graduates are eligible to apply for some recruitment agencies, but time is needed to register with professional bodies (S Michael, Director of Match Group

Australia, 2006, pers. comm. 20 February), so interested graduates should begin investigating early. Recruitment agencies often have access to jobs that are not widely advertised, as they are contacted by employers directly (S Michael, Director of Match Group Australia, 2006, pers. comm. 20 February), making them a useful tool for graduates attempting to enter the hidden job market.

3.2 The Dietitian's Association of Australia

In addition to the benefits of membership mentioned above, membership of the DAA also gives graduates access to information about jobs in dietetics. The DAA website includes classifieds and recruitment resources which may be beneficial to dietetics graduates, and are available to members only (DAA National Office, 2006, pers. comm. 22 February). Networks formed through membership may also lead to access to unadvertised positions. The DAA may also maintain a locum register for dietitians willing to do casual work (B McLeod, Chief Allied Health Officer, NSW Health, 2006, pers. comm. 26 February). Such experience may increase graduate employability for permanent positions (S McAlpin, course coordinator, 2006, pers. comm., 1 March). Students intending to work overseas must also seek accreditation with the relevant association in their country of choice (match group email).

3.3 Advertised Jobs- the Internet and Newspapers

A number of jobs are advertised on the internet or in newspaper classifieds. It is well worth searching for jobs in this way, because positions in the public sector must be advertised (S McAlpin, course coordinator, 2006, pers. comm., 1 March). One website, www.jobsearch.com.au, has links to several other websites where jobs are advertised. In many cases, jobs published in newspaper classifieds are also placed on the web. Each website has a search engine that can be used to find dietetics jobs; more general searches usually give more options to look at, but may not suit the individual graduate's circumstances regarding location, type of work and so on. Jobs are also advertised in newspapers. NSW health jobs are usually advertised in the Sydney Morning Herald on Thursdays (S McAlpin, course coordinator, 2006, pers. comm., 1 March), as well as on the NSW Health website (B McLeod, Chief Allied Health Officer, NSW Health, 2006, pers. comm. 26 February). Other newspapers also advertise positions. Many advertisements are not specifically targeted at graduates, but do allow qualified graduates to apply (B McLeod, Chief Allied Health Officer, NSW Health, 2006, pers. comm. 26 February).

3.4 Rural Positions

As a rural university campus, CSU prepares students well for work in rural areas upon graduation. This preparation begins from first year in Nutrition and Dietetics 1 (NUT101). In the three years of graduation from the dietetics course to date, each year has shown an increase in the percentage of graduates working in rural areas- with up to 90% of the most recent graduate class working rurally (S McAlpin, course coordinator, 2006, pers. comm., 1 March). This rural focus is beneficial for finding employment, as demand for allied health professionals is greater in rural areas when compared to metropolitan areas (S McAlpin, course coordinator, 2006, pers. comm., 1 March). As students are often from a rural background themselves, they are likely to undertake site visits and placements in rural areas (S McAlpin, course coordinator, 2006, pers. comm., 1 March). This is likely to prepare students well for work in rural areas. Students wanting to work in rural areas should look to their employer to set up strategies to offer support and professional development, which may not be as easily

accessed in country areas compared to metropolitan positions (S McAlpin, course coordinator, 2006, pers. comm., 1 March). The experience of studying in the country and living away from home is also helpful preparation for students wanting to work rurally, building their independence (S McAlpin, course coordinator, 2006, pers. comm., 1 March).

4. When to Locate and Act

4.1 The Final Year of Study

Most dietetics students at CSU begin seeking employment during their final year of study (S McAlpin, course coordinator, 2006, pers. comm., 1 March). They may begin applying for positions from half way through that year (S McAlpin, course coordinator, 2006, pers. comm., 1 March). The nature of dietetics is such that there is not particular time of year that employers seek graduates to fill positions (B McLeod, Chief Allied Health Officer, NSW Health, 2006, pers. comm. 26 February). The lecturers in dietetics may alert final year students of upcoming opportunities as they arise throughout the year to assist them in finding employment (S McAlpin, course coordinator, 2006, pers. comm., 1 March). Some students may also have the opportunity to work on locum at Canberra Hospital, which takes some students each year (S McAlpin, course coordinator, 2006, pers. comm., 1 March). While these are only temporary positions, the work experience is valuable in increasing the graduate's competitiveness in finding a full time permanent position upon completion of the locum (S McAlpin, course coordinator, 2006, pers. comm., 1 March).

4.2 Start Investigating Early

While employment is not generally found before the final session or completion of study, it may be beneficial to become familiar with where and how to find work earlier, such as during third year, when placements begin. Networking and self assessment are also valuable in job hunting, and can begin as soon as the individual student chooses. Maddison (2001) suggests a time break up when searching for job opportunities in the penultimate and final years of study. This can be found at www.gradlink.edu.au/content/view/full/1504.

5. Conclusion

The Bachelor of Health Science (Nutrition and Dietetics) at Charles Sturt University prepares students well for employment upon graduation. The placements undertaken in third and fourth years are useful for networking, as are the small class sizes and contact with lecturers. There are a number of resources available for graduates to improve their chances of employment, including the Dietitian's Association of Australia. While positions are generally not secured before fourth year, preparing for this through networking and assessing relevant skills throughout the final two years of study may be useful in finding work upon the completion of the course. Work in rural areas may be of particular interest to graduates of this degree, due to both higher demand for allied health professionals, and the rural focus of the course itself.

6. Recommendations

- Start preparing early by networking and recognising personal skills.
- Consider working in rural areas.
- Join the Dietitian's Association of Australia in third or fourth year of study.
- Use the internet, newspapers, and networks to locate positions.

References

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