



**Graduate Prospects**

mature  
students - the  
way forward

**Special Interest Series 2005**

# AGCAS INFORMATION

## SECTOR BRIEFINGS

Find these in Explore job sectors on [www.prospects.ac.uk/links/SectorBs](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/SectorBs)

Accountancy and Business Services  
Advertising and PR  
Broadcast, Film and Interactive Media  
City Markets  
Construction  
Creative and Cultural Arts  
Education  
Engineering  
Environmental, Food Chain and Rural  
Fashion and Textile  
Financial Services  
Food and Drink  
Health  
Hospitality  
Information Technology  
Legal  
Local, Regional and National Government  
Manufacturing  
Oil, Gas and Petroleum  
Publishing  
Retail  
Science  
Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs)  
Social Care  
Sport and Leisure  
Tourism  
Transport and Logistics  
Voluntary

## SPECIAL INTEREST SERIES

Available in your HE Careers Service and on [www.prospects.ac.uk](http://www.prospects.ac.uk)

Beyond Nine to Five - Flexible Working  
Careers and Further Study for International Students  
Going for Interviews  
Job Seeking Strategies  
Making Applications  
Mature Students - The Way Forward  
New Directions - Changing or Leaving Your Course  
Postgraduate Study & Research  
Self-employment  
Using Languages  
Working Abroad  
Your Degree... What Next?  
Your Foundation Degree... What Next?  
Your HND... What Next?  
Your Masters... What Next?  
Your PhD... What Next?

## OCCUPATIONAL PROFILES

Details for over 400 types of jobs

Available on [www.prospects.ac.uk/links/Occupations](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/Occupations)

## OPTIONS

Ideas of what you can do with your subject of study

Available on [www.prospects.ac.uk/links/Options](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/Options)

Available in your HE Careers Service and on  
[www.prospects.ac.uk](http://www.prospects.ac.uk)

# Contents

## Mature Students

- 1 **Introduction 3**
  - Who is this booklet for? 3
  - Why make a distinction between older and younger graduates? 3
  - Does older mean better? 3
  - Why do employers worry about age? 4
  - Trends in employment opportunities 4
- 2 **Getting started 5**
  - Preparation 5
- 3 **Looking back on your life 7**
  - Skills and abilities 7
  - Interests 8
  - Personality 8
  - Values and motivation 8
- 4 **Making written applications 10**
- 5 **Interviews 12**
  - Getting interview practice 12
  - Positive and confident presentation 12
  - The interview process 12
  - Asking for feedback 13
  - Coping with rejection 13
- 6 **Finding a job 13**
  - Traditional methods 13
  - Creative job searching 14
- 7 **Information sources 16**
  - Bibliography 16
  - Addresses 16

---

Writer: **Anne Goodman** (AGCAS)  
Editor: **Gemma Green** (AGCAS)

---

Published autumn 2005  
Reprinted autumn 2006  
To be revised autumn 2007

The writers of the *Special Interest Series* are members of the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS). These *Special Interest Series* are edited by the Information and Content Development Department (ICDD) of Graduate Prospects and distributed by Graduate Prospects. Full editorial control is exercised by AGCAS.

Although every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this booklet is accurate and is as up-to-date as possible, readers should check with the appropriate organisation for the latest information. AGCAS can accept no responsibility for ensuring that the accuracy is absolute. To notify us of any changes, contact [agcassint@prospects.ac.uk](mailto:agcassint@prospects.ac.uk)

©Copyright of or licensed to AGCAS

No part of this publication may be copied or reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher.



Millennium House  
30 Junction Road  
Sheffield S11 8XB  
[www.agcas.org.uk](http://www.agcas.org.uk)

## **Graduate Prospects**

Prospects House, Booth Street East,  
Manchester M13 9EP  
Tel: 0161 277 5200  
[www.prospects.ac.uk](http://www.prospects.ac.uk)

# 1 Introduction

## WHO IS THIS BOOKLET FOR?

If you are going to be over 25 on completion of your degree and are likely to be job hunting in the near future, then this booklet is for you. If you are under this age, then it is unlikely that your job prospects will differ significantly from those of younger graduates.

This booklet will help you to:

- clarify some of the advantages of your age and experience;
- review age-related recruitment issues and address the difficulties they may create;
- explore the importance of identifying job-related selection criteria
- develop positive career search strategies, which should help to enhance your career prospects.

This publication does not deal with specific occupations. Most AGCAS Occupational Profiles ([www.prospects.ac.uk/links/occupations](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/occupations)) include comments on the prospects of mature entry; the advice and information contained here should be read in conjunction with these profiles.

## WHY MAKE A DISTINCTION BETWEEN OLDER AND YOUNGER GRADUATES?

In common with most students, you probably value highly the opportunity to study and the sense of achievement gained from this. Buoyed by greater personal confidence, you may look to build on this experience through a new graduate-level career. Your unique mix of past experience and current circumstances will need careful consideration. Ultimately, your choice of career may entail a difficult balancing act and you will need to weigh up many factors, which may be of little or no relevance to younger graduates.

It is the very richness and diversity of your background, experience and personal circumstances that can complicate the move from higher education into employment. High expectations may find you unprepared for the difficulties you might encounter with potential employers. There can sometimes be a gap between the career expectations of mature students and the job opportunities readily available to them. In some cases, if you are older, it can be harder to get what you want.

Realistically, the range of possibilities may be different but not necessarily worse. Indeed, some

opportunities may be more readily accessible to you as an older graduate with a track record of prior work experience or relevant expertise. However, it may take longer to find the right 'niche' and may require more sustained effort on your part; it may also require you to have a greater degree of self-awareness of the value of your own skills and experience.

You are likely to need help to:

- re-assess your situation on graduation;
- identify appropriate and feasible options;
- plan your transition into employment;
- make the most of your previous experience and achievements;
- motivate yourself to keep making job applications.

## The age question

It will be illegal to discriminate on the basis of age from October 2006. Final details of the new legislation are still awaited but two consultations have revealed how complicated the new law will be and that this legislation will be the most radical change to employment law for a generation.

Although you may still come across outdated recruitment practices based on age, age limits in job advertisements will become almost entirely a thing of the past – as alien as specifying gender requirements is today. An age limit for a post will only be lawful if there is a genuine occupational requirement (GOR) or if it is objectively justified. Graduate recruitment schemes will also come under scrutiny.

## DOES OLDER MEAN BETTER?

In a wide range of occupations and for a growing number of employers, the answer is frequently 'yes'. A comment by an experienced line manager underlines this:

*'I would not discriminate on age when recruiting graduates, based on hiring more than 20 graduates over the last eight years. Mature students usually have a well-developed work style; this helps the recruiter to make a better match between the applicant and the job on offer. In my experience, mature graduates progress more quickly and are able to assume major responsibilities in a shorter time-frame.'*

You will have a wealth of experience to draw on - from life in general and previous work - and can

almost certainly offer the following to potential employers:

- a flexible attitude;
- stability;
- the ability to 'juggle';
- commitment;
- the ability to cope under pressure;
- realism and a balanced approach;
- good people skills;
- useful work experience;
- evidence of determination.

## WHY DO EMPLOYERS WORRY ABOUT AGE?

The good news is that not all of them do; employers vary a great deal in their attitudes and policies on age and employment. The public sector has developed and implemented progressive recruitment policies; private sector employers tend to reflect the diversity of organisational cultures. Your job is to identify the particular concerns (or prejudices) of specific employers in order to assess your chances of countering them.

Some employers like to recruit in accordance with their own image; for others, age may be one of the simplest pre-selection criteria when faced with a mountain of application forms. Of course, from 2006, legislation will be in place to discourage these practices. However, this does not mean that prejudices will go away - the culture of a particular organisation or occupational field may still be ageist and you may need to look for indirect ways of entering your chosen field or reassess your options.

You should try to understand employers' perspectives and worries about employing a mature graduate. These may include:

- lack of mobility;
- higher salary expectations;
- lack of flexibility or adaptability;
- unreliability;
- slower to pick things up;
- attitudes and age prejudice of other employees;
- repercussions of early retirement policies (reducing the likely return on training investment);
- higher costs (because of age-related pay scales).

Often (but not always) these fears are groundless and you can take steps to address them. However, some employers may have encountered difficulties in the past, or find resistance at senior

management or shop floor levels, and such attitudes may prove difficult to influence.

Criticisms by employers of applications from older graduates can sometimes be justified. These may include:

- low self-confidence;
- inadequate research;
- poorly completed or confusing applications;
- inability to link life and work experience with the needs of the employer;
- lack of understanding of the organisational culture.

With extra effort, most of these pitfalls can be avoided.

You should seek advice at an early stage and use this booklet and the resources available to you at your careers service.

*'I would advise any undergraduate, irrespective of age, to make as much use of their careers service as soon as possible. Three (or four) years pass very quickly and, without the help and guidance of careers professionals, you can find yourself in a similar situation to that which may have prompted you to go into higher education in the first place.'*

## TRENDS IN EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Forecasting future trends is fraught with uncertainty - there are always a range of factors that need to be considered. The following are just some of the issues that may affect the labour market over the coming years:

- In general terms, employment is expected to continue to rise. Long-term employment growth is expected to be just under 0.5% per annum, resulting in over 1.3 million additional jobs over the first decade of the 21st century. The vast majority of additional jobs are expected to be taken by women and the working age population and labour force are expected to undergo significant growth.
- The number of graduate vacancies in 2004 rose by 15.5%.
- For the last few years, the proportion of graduates unemployed six months after graduation has hovered around the 6% mark. However, this drops considerably with time. It is important to note that graduates need time to settle in the labour market and initial underemployment is not a reliable indicator of longer-term labour market outcomes. According to analysis of the government's Labour Force

Survey (LFS) for the period March 2001 to February 2002, and reported in the autumn 2002 edition of *Graduate Market Trends (GMT)*, the unemployment rate for graduates aged 21-50 was 3% compared to 5% for non-graduates in the same age bracket.

- New patterns of employment and career paths are evolving, which could ultimately benefit older applicants, but this needs to be matched by flexibility in the expectations of mature students.
- The government hopes that the new legislation will encourage good practice in all aspects of the employment cycle and result in an effective

equal opportunities strategy to create a more diverse and motivated workforce.

- Growing European labour mobility further increases the potential for diversity in the educational background and experience of graduate applicants, which opens up new fields of opportunity, especially for new graduates with substantial previous work experience.

*What Do Graduates Do?*

([www.prospects.ac.uk/links/WDGD](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/WDGD)) gives a useful overview of the career destinations of graduates by subject group.

---

## 2 Getting started

### PREPARATION

This really is the key to getting the job you want. However time-consuming looking for opportunities during your final year feels, it is time well spent. Of course, as a mature student, you may have researched possible careers before starting on your course; indeed, these opportunities may have dictated your choice of degree subject. If not – start now!

Early preparation allows you to:

- take time to consider your skills, aims, strengths, interests and personal circumstances;
- identify and remedy any gaps or weaknesses in your background;
- research employers and trends in the employment market;
- make contacts, network and gain experience;
- plan a strategy for your move into work.

Begin by drawing up an action plan. This could include:

- assessing yourself and your experience;
- exploring job options;
- gaining experience.

You could then go along to your careers service to discuss your options: talk through your plan, discuss your skills and needs, and use their resources to research potential jobs and employers.

### Assessing yourself and your experience

- Are you clear about the jobs that interest you?
- Are you realistic? Have you got what employers require?

- Have you assessed your experience positively, to make the most of what you have to offer?

Choosing a potential area of work involves carrying out a personal skills analysis. This is dealt with in more depth in chapter 3 'Looking back on your life'.

### Exploring options

Research into potential employment areas is important. As a mature student, you need to know how realistic your ideas are and whether they are attainable with your skills, experience and personal circumstances. You should:

- find out what jobs and courses previous graduates of your course have entered by looking at the destination information held by your careers service (although this won't necessarily indicate who were mature students);
- use computerised careers guidance systems available in your careers service, eg Prospects Planner ([www.prospects.ac.uk/links/ppanner](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/ppanner));
- find out if there is a mature students group in your university - if there is, get in touch and ask them to share their experiences;
- look at *What Do Graduates Do?*, AGCAS Occupational Profiles, AGCAS Sector Briefings, AGCAS Options Series (all available from your careers service or online at [Prospects.ac.uk](http://Prospects.ac.uk)) or other information tailored towards mature students;
- discuss your ideas with your family, friends, colleagues, tutors or careers adviser;
- try to gain experience and information first hand.

*'Certain employers are guilty of ageism. I was too old to apply for certain graduate training positions,*

*even though I was willing. However, I overcame this problem by focusing on career areas where age and experience are viewed positively.'*

### **Researching employers**

It is a good idea to:

- start with the information held in your careers service - look at employer files and links to their websites;
- as well as looking at employers' graduate opportunities, look at the corporate section of the website - this can give you a lot of useful background information;
- consult relevant professional or trade journals and the local and national press for vacancies/information about employers and companies starting up, expanding or moving location;
- build up a file of information (interesting vacancies, cuttings, details of useful contacts from visits, work experience and projects, letters received in reply to requests for information, etc) - this will add strength to your applications by showing that you took an early interest in the employment market and potential future employers.

Have a look at *Prospects Directory* for graduate job opportunities and employer listings.

### **How to gain experience**

*'If taking the degree is a complete change in career, take up some part-time work, paid or unpaid, and start very early to compile a CV and build up experience around the degree.'*

Having experience of the area you are interested in can sometimes give you the edge when it comes to being successful in your job search. Some occupations are particularly suited to those with substantial experience, eg community, social and probation work and other related fields.

*'A degree is not enough, some employers want a lot more, but it does mean many more sacrifices than just study time.'*

Gaining experience:

- improves your skills and confidence;
- helps you to assess your strengths in relation to work;
- will provide you with useful contacts and references;
- is a great opportunity to make contact with prospective employers.

### **Industrial training/placements**

Take any opportunities your course offers for placements, work experience or projects with employers. However tempting it may seem to keep your course short, do not underestimate the value of such experience. For work experience opportunities and information, see *Prospects Work Experience* and [Work-experience.org](http://Work-experience.org).

### **Vacation employment**

Look for vacation schemes advertised via your careers service or make speculative applications.

### **Voluntary work**

Contact your local volunteer bureau who may be able to put you in touch with appropriate projects or organisations.

### **Work-shadowing**

Approach an employer and ask if you can work-shadow someone in your chosen profession/career for one or two days or longer (even better if this was a mature graduate). This is a great chance to gain first-hand insights into working practices and talk to people who have recently come through the job hunting experience themselves.

### **Visits**

Arrange visits to local employers to talk to recent entrants or the recruitment manager for a general overview and advice. Take your CV for feedback and ask about opportunities for mature graduates and suggestions of ways to prepare and present yourself. See chapter 6 'Finding a job - Creative job searching' for more ideas about how to make contact with employers.

### **Top tips**

The AGCAS Older Graduates Task Group and the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR) have compiled a list of top tips for mature students applying for jobs:

- Produce a concise CV that clearly outlines any relevant experience. Try to match your experience to the job requirements and be prepared to produce more than one CV. If you really want the position, then fully research each employer and tailor your applications accordingly.

*'I always alter and adjust my CV to suit the employer, especially paragraphs on experiences. I would suggest that you consider all prior experiences, even those that seem irrelevant, and, without blatantly lying, fashion them so they match what the employer is looking for.'*

- If you get an interview, you're halfway there. Be confident!
- Use positive language in tailored applications and at interviews. As a starting point, never apologise for your age.
- Use contacts from previous jobs, friends and family to create your own network. Remember that you have probably met more people in your lifetime than the average graduate.
- Identify and highlight the skills you have developed from your previous work, studies and

- general life experience - teamwork, communication, adaptability, time management, organisation and self-motivation - you've just spent a number of years improving these.
- Stress your ability to hit the ground running - you know all about working for a living.
- Demonstrate your flexibility and experience of studying and working in mixed-age environments.
- Convey your reliability, loyalty and confidence to manage change.

---

## 3 Looking back on your life

One of the most common statements made by mature students is:

*'I have a lot of experience but it's not relevant to the job I'm looking for now.'*

It is exactly this range and diversity of experience that makes you such a potential asset to employers.

Experience comes from every aspect of your life: learning, working and living. Time spent in assessing your life to date will provide you with a clearer picture of yourself and what you have to offer. Analysing your background and seeing where and how your life has developed over the years will help you identify your strengths.

Self-assessment is all about asking yourself questions, reflecting thoughtfully on your past and present and then demonstrating the range of skills you have to offer. This process will help with applications and interviews, where employers frequently focus on transferable skills and abilities or competencies. You will also identify weaknesses and frustrations, mistakes you have made and how you have learned from them. At the end of the process, you will be armed with a personal profile covering:

- previous responsibilities and experiences;
- transferable skills and competencies;
- self-awareness of your values, work style and approach;
- an analysis of the turning points in your life;
- evidence of your suitability for your future career (based on aspects of your previous experience).

Many careers services have materials on self-assessment to help with the process.

To begin with, consider these aspects of yourself and your life:

- skills and abilities;
- interests;
- personality;
- values and motivation.

*'I spent a long time identifying the skills and experience from my assortment of previous jobs that I could claim to be relevant or transferable. As it turned out, my age didn't seem to be a disadvantage at all. I think what was an advantage for me was that I'd thought hard about what I wanted and what I could offer to an employer, so I could be fairly decisive and confident.'*

### SKILLS AND ABILITIES

Employers usually have a list of attributes or competencies that they hope job applicants will already have acquired in a range of different situations. These transferable skills include:

- communication;
- teamwork;
- problem-solving;
- time management;
- IT;
- business awareness;
- organisational abilities;
- negotiation;
- leadership;
- ability to persuade.

Think in detail about the skills and qualities you have developed throughout your experience. Use the following headings as a guide to build up a profile of yourself:

- learning;
- working;
- living.

What do you have to offer as a result?

### Learning

Higher education may have recently altered your career outlook quite radically but any learning experience, at any level, can be included in your profile:

- degree or HND;
- access and foundation courses;
- short courses;
- in-service courses;
- vocational training.

All types of education and learning experience will have helped you to develop a range of knowledge and skills linked to how you learn. These will include:

- presentation skills;
- research and data analysis;
- group work or team projects;
- writing reports, essays or major pieces of work, eg a dissertation, extended essay or thesis;
- organising and prioritising workloads.

If your course is vocational, you will be able to identify specific skills and knowledge relevant to the career for which you have been preparing. Many degree and HND programmes now include options designed to help the development of career management skills in areas such as:

- languages;
- computing;
- business awareness.

At this stage, it may be useful to look back at what you hoped to achieve when you came into higher education and whether your expectations have been met, both in terms of personal development and academic outcomes.

### Working

Recruiters often comment that mature students have positive skills and experiences to offer employers but that they are not very good at marketing themselves. If you have gained transferable skills from previous work experience, you need to demonstrate these to an employer.

Your employment history may fall into the following broad categories:

- varied or patchy work experience;
- an extensive previous career;
- largely unpaid or informal experience.

### Varied or patchy work experience:

Identify the significant aspects of your work history.

- What was important at different times?
- What were your priorities and aims when changing jobs?
- What motivated you to move around?
- What factors were present during any periods of unemployment?

Positive messages that may emerge include:

- your flexibility and adaptability in dealing with new situations;
- your ability to learn quickly;
- your ability to get on with a wide range of people.

Consider the following when analysing your whole experience:

- differences and similarities between jobs;
- specific tasks you undertook regularly;
- the range of systems, practices and approaches you came across;
- additional responsibilities and one-off projects;
- progression or development in your work.

In particular, you should identify anything directly relevant to the opportunities you are now pursuing.

Then ask yourself:

- What were the most interesting aspects of all the jobs you had, and why?
- What were you good and not so good at doing?
- Were there any features of past jobs you would like to have in your new career?

### Extensive previous career:

If you have worked for a long period of time in one particular industry or occupation then the same analysis can be applied. You could also consider the following:

- How did your career develop over the years?
- What extra training, responsibilities or duties did you undertake?
- What have you learned about yourself as a result?
- What is important in your new career?

### Largely unpaid or informal experience:

This may include involvement in:

- charity/fund-raising activities;
- childminding groups;
- community committees, residents' associations, campaigning, politics;
- schools;
- caring, practical, advisory and other support work.

All the above offer a useful set of skills, which are likely to be easily transferable into a work environment.

### **Living**

Reflecting on the third aspect of your life will complete the picture you are building of yourself. 'I've only been at home with the family' hides a number of scenarios that are mirrored by work situations – you should never use the word 'only' when describing previous roles or responsibilities. A common list of home-based experiences include:

- running a house;
- living on a restricted budget;
- raising a family;
- buying a house;
- selecting a school for your children;
- organising a wedding;
- coping with everyday family life.

Compare the above list with the following work-based experiences:

- overseeing the administration of an office;
- running a stock control system;
- managing and motivating a team;
- negotiating a business contract with a client;
- identifying appropriate training for a work force;
- planning an international conference;
- drawing up a staff rota and targets.

There are similarities at every point. Knowing where your own strengths have been developed will help you present a positive picture to employers.

### **INTERESTS**

What you choose to do in your spare time says things about you and your personality that other parts of your life don't reveal. Commitment, motivation, determination and a range of other skills can be demonstrated through the pursuit of hobbies and leisure activities.

### **PERSONALITY**

Employers may have an idea of a particular personality type that they want for a job: some may even use a personality questionnaire to discover if you fit the bill; others may try to identify your personality from your application form.

Think about whether you are:

- resilient;
- patient;
- cautious;
- adventurous;
- meticulous;
- calm;
- excitable;
- competitive;
- flexible;
- adaptable.

Investigate the personal qualities that will be needed to succeed in the jobs you have in mind using information provided by employers, as well as your own experience of meeting people in these jobs. Working in a role that matches your personality and temperament will be of benefit both to you and your employer.

### **VALUES AND MOTIVATION**

We are all motivated by different things and we value some things more than others. Identifying your own priorities is a valuable part of the self-assessment process.

- What do you want from your career? Money? Status? Respect from others? A challenge? Contact with like-minded people?
- Is career progression a motivating factor?
- Is work/life balance important?
- Are your values the same now as when you were younger?
- How far are you prepared to compromise?
- What effect will your values and motivation have on your choice of career and employer?

# 4 Making written applications

*'The application form was incredibly lengthy, I nearly didn't bother to fill it in at all: it took so much effort and thought.'*

Making applications can be daunting and time-consuming. A good application form or CV requires any student to do a great deal of work.

A job application is often your only means of persuading the selectors to interview you. It is, therefore, the most important and competitive stage in the recruitment process. Whatever your age, you will be drawing on past experience to sell yourself. Employers will appreciate that many mature students have a range of skills but you will need to highlight what these are as clearly as possible.

Employers get very used to stock phrases and clichés; your application must be individual to you and give an honest interpretation of your experience. Employers also look for substance, not glibness or waffle. The way you express the information should reflect the skills, attributes and qualities that are relevant to that particular application.

Ask a careers adviser to look at your CV, covering letter and application form to check you are selling yourself effectively. If you are unsuccessful in getting an interview, take an honest look at your application and check that it really is of the quality likely to interest an employer.

Common issues that many mature students need to address when applying for jobs or courses are:

- making the most of the past;
- non-standard qualifications;
- no formal work experience;
- voluntary work experience or community involvement;
- work experience at a lower level;
- unrelated work experience;
- relevant work experience.

## **Making the most of your past**

*'I looked at the little things I did - running a home requires good budgeting, time management and organisational skills.'*

An advantage of being a mature graduate is that you have much more to offer a prospective

employer than simply qualifications. Your application should capitalise on your experience and offer evidence of personal qualities and skills to persuade the interviewer that you are worth seeing.

*'I think being a mature student was useful, as the post required a great deal of tact, personal experience and life experience.'*

Generally, the later in life you enter higher education, the more you will need to describe your history and explain your intentions to prospective employers. You need to offer a rationale for what you have done and what you intend to do to reassure an employer - many will be used to looking at 'conventional' graduate applications. You also need to identify the benefits you have gained and point out why these make you a more attractive applicant for the job.

## **Non-standard qualifications**

Employers may be wary of taking on people with non-standard academic backgrounds but are often open to persuasion. They may not know what some qualifications are so you need to explain them clearly:

- give the full title, not an abbreviation, explain when and where you took the course and how much time it required (full/part time, two evenings a week, seven hours of home study, etc);
- if possible, equate the level of the qualification to those that are well-known (GCSE, A-level, BTEC, HNC/HND etc);
- explain why you took the course and what you achieved from it.

As space is often scarce on both an application form and a CV, tailor the information to suit the format. On an application form you may have to adapt the 'education' section or use the 'additional information' section to outline and explain your choice of course.

## **No formal work experience**

As a rough guide, any work experience, paid or not, can go under the 'work experience' section of an application form.

*'Ten years at home with the kids doesn't give me much to work on.'*

Do not underestimate your abilities! Think laterally about the qualities, skills, knowledge and insights you have gained or developed during your life. Try to counter any likely stereotypes. For example, demonstrate your suitability for a job by offering evidence of what is needed to manage a busy household successfully:

'For ten years before going to university, I managed a particularly lively family. This developed my capacity to: get things done, despite constant interruptions; deal with a variety of problems at the same time; liaise with professional people to gain assistance and advice; and organise and co-ordinate a wide range of activities and commitments.'

Alternatively, you could translate these activities into:

- good time management skills;
- the ability to multi-task;
- negotiation skills;
- communication skills;
- organisational skills.

Always try to back up your claims with evidence.

### **Voluntary work experience or community involvement**

*'Luckily, the voluntary work I did whilst at university, along with the work experience I gained during the summer vacation and the year I was in full-time work, has given me skills to add to my CV. Even though sometimes it seems hard to relate it all to my preferred area of work, I do feel that I have got a lot more experience to offer a prospective employer than a younger graduate.'*

Voluntary experience can provide very strong evidence of your:

- people skills;
- organisational ability;
- commitment;
- willingness to take responsibility;
- ability to handle several responsibilities at once.

Any community involvement might be included under 'activities and interests' on an application form or CV.

### **Work experience at a lower level**

If you have worked before, but in jobs with skills

demands below your usual abilities, use a structured summary to draw out the items most relevant to the job for which you are applying. Don't undersell yourself by failing to analyse all your skills and qualities or by being too modest but, similarly, don't over-exaggerate, as you could be asked about anything you include on your application!

Here is an honest description of the skills gained in a clerical job:

*'Before starting my degree, I spent eight years in the administrative offices of Bloggs and Co. I learned: how to cope with a heavy workload but always to maintain high standards; how to communicate with a wide range of people at all levels; and how to work in a team. Frustrated by being held back by lack of promotion prospects, I decided to take on the challenge of studying for a degree.'*

### **Unrelated work experience**

If you have work experience in line with your level of ability but of a type not related to the work for which you are applying, the main task is to explain your change of direction. A section headed 'objectives' could be used in a CV or incorporated into your covering letter:

*'Having gained insights into various types of organisations during my ten years in computing, and with my experience of supervision, I am keen to establish a career in management, preferably in the field of environmental health, which has formed part of my degree.'*

### **Relevant work experience**

Include a simple, brief description of each job in reverse chronological order. Include your key achievements and the skills you demonstrated in the role. If you have substantial relevant work experience, an application form is unlikely to allow you room to describe it all, however briefly. Use a separate sheet of paper (but avoid adding more than one extra sheet) and cross-reference it in the 'employment' section.

For more information about applying for jobs and tips for producing an effective CV and covering letter, see the AGCAS Special Interest booklet *Making Applications*.

# 5 Interviews

When you are invited for an interview, remind yourself that the employer believes you are as capable of doing the job as any other short-listed applicant. Your age has not deterred the employer; now you need to convince them that you are the right person for the job.

## GETTING INTERVIEW PRACTICE

This is vitally important, particularly because it may be several years since you had a formal interview. A practice interview will help you:

- cope with the 'real thing';
- anticipate standard questions and approaches;
- consider appropriate responses;
- feel more confident about the whole experience.

Your careers service may offer mock interview facilities with a careers adviser. You can then discuss the interview together.

*'My first couple of interviews went quite well so by the time I got to the interview with my preferred company I was feeling fairly comfortable about the whole thing and reasonably confident that I could cope with almost any question. Being a little more relaxed and well-prepared helped me to perform well.'*

## POSITIVE AND CONFIDENT PRESENTATION

*'Mature students do offer additional experiences that younger students have not had. Often, life experiences bring a richer and fuller perspective to the issues being discussed.'*

Employers often enjoy interviewing mature students as they bring with them a range of life and work experiences. However, given your age, the interviewer may expect more of you than from a conventional younger graduate. You must be prepared to reflect the interviewer's assumption that you are mature and, therefore, able to hold a conversation, and show reason and responsibility in your choice of job.

## THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

*'I suppose I must have been a bit dim but I honestly didn't realise they would interview me*

*more than once; I must have kept my ignorance well hidden as they gave me a second interview.'*

If you have not had an interview for a job for several years, or the level of job you are applying for is above any you have had in the past, here are a few general points:

- Interviewers can come from any part of the organisation and may not be the person for whom you will end up working.
- Employers usually interview to a set of standards and procedures - they will have specific criteria that they will measure you against.
- The selection process can involve two stages: a first, short interview with one interviewer who will concentrate on the information given in your application and make a judgement about your suitability for the job or a further interview; and a second, extended interview some time later, which may involve a range of assessments tests and exercises.
- Interviewers will ask for evidence of your skills, abilities and personal qualities, often termed employability skills. These should match the requirements of the job specification. Research the skills they are expecting and volunteer examples of these. Remember that these can be drawn from personal experience and do not have to be from paid employment to have credibility.

Think about the questions you may be asked as a mature applicant.

### **Questions that emphasise your age and suggest it might be a problem**

Sell yourself and the benefits of maturity positively; have ready examples of the benefits of age and experience; and assure the interviewer that you can get on and work with younger people and happily take instruction from people younger than yourself - you have just spent three years doing just that on your course.

### **Questions implying that you will not stay long in the job because you want to start a family**

Calmly affirm that having a family is not an immediate priority or, even better, that work and a family can be combined - never react angrily to these questions or be tempted to say you have no intention of having a family.

### **Questions that suggest you will leave because you will struggle to juggle your other responsibilities with work**

Answer firmly and positively in a way that confirms that you would not have applied for the job had you not assured yourself that your domestic affairs were under control - it really is not the employer's problem.

In general, if you are asked a provocative or inappropriate question, it is wise not to over-react but to give a clear and confident response, which aims to eradicate any doubts employers have, whether justified or not. Don't forget that if you are offered the job despite pointed or discriminatory questions, you need to consider carefully if the organisational culture is one within which you can work.

### **ASKING FOR FEEDBACK**

If, despite all your hard work, you are not asked back for a second interview or offered the job, you need to know why. It is quite acceptable to ask interviewers for feedback on your performance.

- Phone as soon as you hear their decision.

- Listen to the positive as well as the negative points made.
- Discuss the interview and the feedback with a careers adviser.

You need to know if there is a problem you could solve, and build on the advice given for next time.

### **COPING WITH REJECTION**

Nobody likes to be rejected and it's quite normal to feel angry, bitter and fed up. However, if you want to turn your rejection into a useful experience:

- remain positive - whether it's your first or fifteenth rejection, focus on the experience and positive feedback you're getting;
- don't take it personally - decisions are always based on a number of factors - you were just unlucky this time;
- keep applying - practice will eventually make perfect.

For more information about the selection process and tips for attending interviews, see the AGCAS Special Interest booklet *Going for Interviews*.

---

## **6 Finding a job**

All strategies should be considered - traditional methods and a more creative approach - to ensure you have the best possible chance of securing the job you really want.

### **How to prepare**

Before starting your job search you will need:

- a choice of occupation and employment sector that matches your skills, interests and abilities;
- an effective CV emphasising your transferable skills - check the format and content with a careers adviser;
- a thorough knowledge of the work and the employers you are targeting;
- a realistic and positive approach;
- an understanding of possible employer attitudes and misconceptions about mature students, and how to counter them;
- perseverance and ingenuity.

You may also find the AGCAS Special Interest booklet *Job Seeking Strategies* useful for further job hunting tips.

### **TRADITIONAL METHODS**

Information on job opportunities can be found through various sources (see chapter 7 'Information sources' for more details):

- national vacancy bulletins;
- careers service vacancy bulletins;
- graduate websites, including [Prospects.ac.uk](http://Prospects.ac.uk);
- employers' websites;
- newspapers (national and local), magazines (specialist) and journals (paper and web versions);
- graduate employer directories, such as *Prospects Directory*;
- specialist graduate directories;
- employer visits at your institution - some larger employers carry out selection activities through organised events on campus;
- recruitment fairs - run by universities and commercial organisations. For an up-to-date list of careers fairs in your area, see [www.prospects.ac.uk/links/careerfairs](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/careerfairs).

Your careers service can provide further information on all of these.

## CREATIVE JOB SEARCHING

A creative job search is just that – an imaginative approach to finding work, using individual methods and strategies that you may not find in any guides to job hunting.

You may be surprised to know that a large number of jobs, particularly in the private sector, are never advertised and employers select from speculative applications, internal candidates and other known contacts.

Creative job seeking can be especially appropriate for mature students because:

- your wealth of previous work and life experience, knowledge and skills give you access to a wider range of employment and entry points;
- the benefits of a less conventional background can often be promoted more effectively using an individual approach;
- you may be looking for work in a more limited geographical area;
- you might have a good network of contacts already.

Two strategies often effective in this area are networking - building up a range of contacts - and making speculative applications.

### Networking - how to identify contacts

Think about everyone you know who is employed: friends; family; colleagues; and fellow students. Is there anyone working in the same sort of organisation you are interested in joining? If so, they are your first point of contact. They may even be able to provide you with a contact name or advance notice of any vacancies coming up.

Contacts might also be made through:

- tutors - they may know of another mature student studying part time and working for a local employer;
- careers services - they often have a contacts list of past students currently employed;
- alumni associations - they may have lists of past graduates (mature or otherwise) who are often willing to assist with advice and information;
- mentoring schemes - these put students in contact with individuals within organisations who can help and support them with job hunting, eg

National Mentoring Consortium Schemes (NMCS);

- professional bodies - they often have regional advisers who may help;
- industry yearbooks - they may provide names of individuals (and their job titles) you could target.

### Making your approach

Most people are sympathetic and willing to talk about career options and their own career path.

If contacting someone by telephone, letter or e-mail:

- explain why you are contacting them;
- say how much time you would like: 'could you spare 10/15 minutes...?';
- if the person you contact is unable or unwilling to help, ask them if they can suggest anyone else who could;
- write and thank everyone who helps you with your contacts list or with advice about your career - you never know when you might come into contact with that person again (it may be when they interview you for a job).

Knocking on doors is another possibility but you should consider the following before going down this route:

- you may have to deal with face-to-face rejection;
- you may have problems getting past reception/security to see the right person;
- personal safety - make sure that you let someone know where you are going and how long you expect to be there.

### Advantages of networking

Networking can be quite time-consuming but well worth it for the following reasons:

- a suitable job may come up in the future;
- you may get useful advice on your CV, interview technique and how you present yourself;
- your contact might know other people who can help you in some way;
- you can identify companies you would like to work for and use your contacts to keep in touch with them, which will demonstrate your commitment.

### Speculative applications

Employers often view speculative approaches as a sign of initiative and interest in their industry. Here are a few tips:

- identify and target appropriate organisations only;
- tailor your letter and CV to individual employers;

- mention any contacts you already have or previous visits you have made to that employer;
- include details of any projects or coursework that are relevant;
- mention that you will contact them again in about two weeks to see if there are any opportunities available.

If the employer says there are no vacancies at present, you should ask them to keep your details on file for future vacancies and follow up these organisations at a later date to see if any vacancies have arisen.

It may be worth noting that feedback from employers suggests speculative applications are probably best made by letter rather than e-mail.

### **Indirect routes**

If you are having difficulty entering the job market, you may wish to consider:

- short-term unpaid work experience;
- project-based work;

- maternity cover posts;
- temporary jobs;
- voluntary work;
- further training or postgraduate courses;
- freelance or contract work, if appropriate.

Make sure you keep in touch with the employment market you wish to enter and maintain your network of contacts.

The whole process of career planning and job hunting is rarely quick; researching options alone can involve many hours of reading and talking to people. You should start the process early in your studies. Others will do all they can to encourage and help you but, ultimately, it is down to you. Visit [www.prospects.ac.uk/links/mature](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/mature) to see case studies of mature graduates, which include details of their approach to employment and the benefits, or otherwise, of being a mature student.

# 7 Information sources

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

**AGCAS and Graduate Prospects products are available from higher education careers services and on [www.prospects.ac.uk](http://www.prospects.ac.uk)**

### AGCAS

AGCAS Special Interest booklets:  
*Beyond Nine to Five - Flexible Working;*  
*Going for Interviews; Job Seeking Strategies;*  
*Making Applications; Postgraduate Study and Research; Self-employment; Your Degree...What Next?; Your Foundation Degree...What Next?; Your HND...What Next?; Your Masters...What Next?*

AGCAS other publications:  
*A Level Playing Field; Managing the Job-Search Resources for Mature Students;*

AGCAS Occupational Profiles  
AGCAS Options Series  
AGCAS Sector Briefings

AGCAS DVDs:  
*Can I Have a Few Minutes of Your Time?; Selection Success in One.*

### Graduate Prospects

*Graduate Market Trends*  
*Prospects Directory*  
*Prospects Finalist*  
*Prospects Graduate*  
*Prospects Planner,*  
[www.prospects.ac.uk/links/ppplanner](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/ppplanner)  
*Prospects Work Experience*  
[Prospects.ac.uk](http://Prospects.ac.uk)  
*What Do Graduates Do?*

### Other publications

*The Hobsons Directory,* CRAC/Hobsons Publications, Annual

### Websites

Association for Non-Traditional Students in Higher Education (ANTSHE), [www.antshe.org](http://www.antshe.org)

Campaign Against Age Discrimination in Employment, [www.caade.net](http://www.caade.net)

FiftyOn, [www.fiftyon.co.uk](http://www.fiftyon.co.uk)

## ADDRESSES

Age Positive, Department for Work and Pensions, Room W8d, Moorfoot, Sheffield S1 4PQ  
Tel: 020 8238 8550 [www.agepositive.gov.uk](http://www.agepositive.gov.uk)

Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR), The Innovation Centre, Warwick Technology Park, Gallows Hill, Warwick CV34 6UW  
Tel: 01926 623236 [www.agr.org.uk](http://www.agr.org.uk)

Department for Education and Skills (DFES), Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT Tel: 0870 000 2288 [www.dfes.gov.uk](http://www.dfes.gov.uk)

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), 2nd Floor, The Adelphi, 1-11 John Adam Street, London WC2N 6HT Tel: 020 7712 2171  
[www.dwp.gov.uk](http://www.dwp.gov.uk)

Employers Forum on Age, 2nd Floor, The Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX  
Tel: 020 7981 0341 [www.efa.org.uk](http://www.efa.org.uk)

Mentoring and Befriending Foundation (MBF), 1st Floor, Charles House, Albert Street, Eccles M30 0PW Tel: 0161 787 8600  
[www.mandbf.org.uk](http://www.mandbf.org.uk)

National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), Regent's Wharf, 8 All Saints St, London N1 9RL Tel: 020 7713 6161 [www.ncvo-vol.org.uk](http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk)

National Council for Work Experience, New Cottage, High Street, Drayton St Leonard, Oxfordshire OX10 7BA Tel: 0845 601 5510  
[www.work-experience.org](http://www.work-experience.org)

# Jobs on the net!

[www.prospects.ac.uk](http://www.prospects.ac.uk)

Job vacancies

Careers guidance

Work experience

**Find it all on the UK's official  
graduate careers website**

**visit [www.prospects.ac.uk](http://www.prospects.ac.uk) the UK's official graduate careers website**

## Checklist

### What should you do next?

Check the websites, contacts and publications listed at the back of this booklet.

Look at the other AGCAS publications listed at the front of this booklet.

Speak to a careers adviser in your HE careers service for more help and information.

Browse the [prospects.ac.uk](http://prospects.ac.uk) website for graduate careers information.

# Guide to AGCAS information on [prospects.ac.uk](http://prospects.ac.uk)

## Options

Ideas of what you can do with your subject of study, with details of skills gained, jobs related to your degree, further study and other options.

**[www.prospects.ac.uk/links/Options](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/Options)**

## Sector Briefings

Overviews of the key job sectors, providing an insight into the culture, tips for entry and progression, and examples of typical jobs and leading employers.

**[www.prospects.ac.uk/links/SectorBs](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/SectorBs)**

## Occupational Profiles

Focusing on over 400 different types of jobs, with details of entry requirements, salary ranges, typical employers and vacancy sources.

**[www.prospects.ac.uk/links/Occupations](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/Occupations)**

## Special Interest Series

Information on job hunting, applications and interviews, postgraduate study, changing your course, using your languages and what to do after your course.

**[www.prospects.ac.uk](http://www.prospects.ac.uk)**

## Country Profiles

Details for working and studying in over 50 countries around the world, including the job market, visa requirements and vacancy sources.

**[www.prospects.ac.uk/links/Countries](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/Countries)**