

Guide to...

Completing Job Application Forms

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Introduction

An application form is your opportunity to convince an employer to invite you to the next stage of the recruitment process, which is often an interview. You need to be clear about why you are applying and demonstrate how your abilities match what they are seeking. To do this effectively you must support all the statements you make within a supporting statement with *examples* drawn from your personal life, professional experience and/or your studies. To achieve this takes a lot of effort - sometimes the application form has been made deliberately harder than submitting a cover letter and CV, to deter candidates from applying who aren't truly interested in the role (amongst other reasons), so give yourself plenty of time to put together an application that best showcases your capabilities.

Online vs paper

The vast majority of organisations now make their applications available online – either as a downloadable document or via an 'application portal' which may involve completing individual pages/sections/questions before submitting. Some online applications have to be completed in one sitting, while others allow you to register and then save your progress as you go along. Be aware that employers may be able to view partially completed forms!

Many employers will provide some guidance notes to help you to complete the application form; read these carefully and follow all instructions.

If you are applying with a paper-based form, make a photocopy or copies to practice on before completing a final draft.

If you decide to re-use information from one application to use in another, ensure that you do not accidentally copy and paste names of other organisations that you've applied to previously, as this will likely result in instant rejection.

Identify reasons for applying

Before you make a start, spend time thinking about your reasons for applying to the job.

- Do you have an interest in the organisation's field of work?
- Will the job support your long-term career goals?
- Are your skills and qualities ideally suited to the job?

Employers pay attention to applicants who have the ability to articulate their motivation for applying.

Do your research

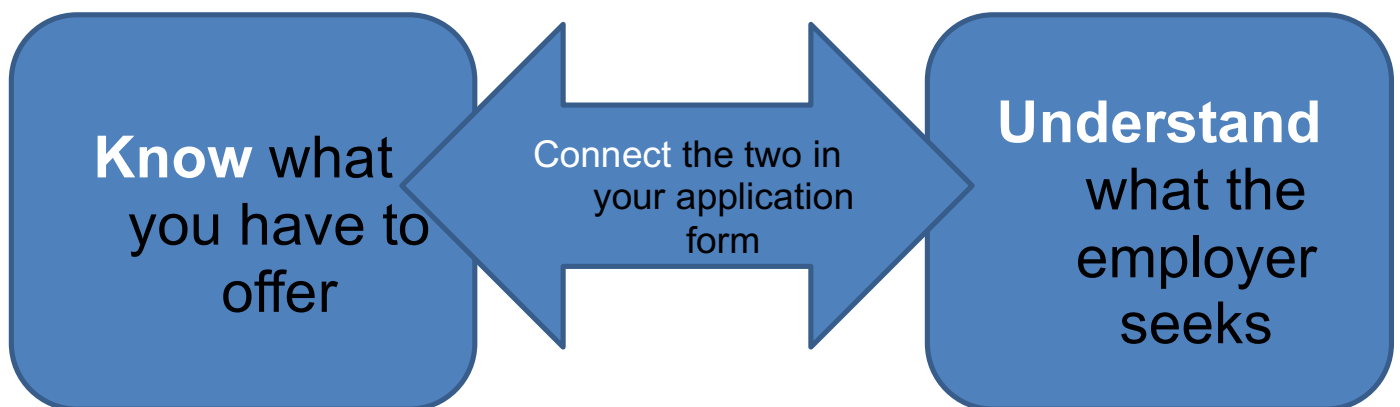
Employers respond positively to applicants who have done their research on the organisation and the job requirements. Most job application forms include supporting documents such as a job description, which outlines the duties and purpose of the job and a person specification which details what the organisation is looking for in successful applicants.

You can also source further information on the organisation's website, such as the annual report, their vision and mission statement, news items, press releases, LinkedIn pages, blogs, and staff profiles.

If there are contact details of a named person in the job advert or job description and it states you can contact that person to find out more about the job, this is a great opportunity. Making a phone call shows initiative, can give a positive first impression and enables you to ask questions to help you write your application. It's important to prepare what you are going to say before making the call to make the best first impression and make the most of this opportunity.

Confronted with a high volume of applications, employers will be looking for that unique quality that separates you from the many applications they receive. One such quality might be your understanding of the organisation and the field of work, or it may be a specialist skill or infectious enthusiasm for the product or service.

Make the connection



What you need to include

Applications are usually divided up into some broad sections:

- **Personal Information** – This will take the shortest amount of time to complete, especially if you have all of your personal data to hand.
- **Employment and Education History** – This can take a while as you will be asked to insert all your employment and education history with dates and descriptions. You may be asked for details of relevant modules that you have undertaken as part of your degree.

AND you will usually be asked to complete:

- **A Personal Statement or 'Additional Information'** – This should be the most time-consuming section and often appears as a 'big, blank, box'. Give yourself plenty of time to structure, draft and re-write it until you're happy that it presents you in the best way. You will need to match all of the 'essential' criteria listed on the person specification (more later) and it will be important to familiarise yourself with the job description to ensure that you make clear links between your experience and what's required for the role. You may consider using the headings in the person specification to help to structure your personal statement.

AND/OR to respond to a set of:

- **Competency questions/questions** - Asking you to prove your ability to undertake the position, often centered on key qualities or tasks for the role. These will take time to plan, write and refine.

Personal info, employment & education history

To begin with you will need to provide personal information, a record of your educational achievement, and a detailed, chronological work history. It is worth storing your personal information in a separate Microsoft Word document as you will find yourself using and re-using the same information in all subsequent applications e.g.

- Full name and personal information
- Address and phone number
- Email address (professional sounding)
- National Insurance Number
- Confirmation that you're eligible to work in the UK
- Disclosure of criminal convictions (if any)
- Education - universities, colleges, schools attended, including grades, start and completion dates.
- Qualifications gained including award and level. In some cases you'll be asked to provide original documents at interview stage.
- Work History:
 - employer name, address, phone, email
 - job title and responsibilities (try to tailor your descriptions of previous positions to show qualities from the person specification)
 - starting and ending dates of employment
 - salary
 - reason for leaving (always try to put a positive 'spin' on this e.g. 'To relocate'/'To take on more responsibility' etc. rather than stating 'To get paid more!' for example)

Using the job description & person specification

You'll need to refer to both the Job Description (JD) and the Person Specification (PS) as you work your way through your application and complete your personal statement or answer competency-based questions.

- **Job Description (JD)** - Details all the duties and responsibilities of the role and typically includes a short description of the company, its ethos, and business goals, in addition to an outline of the purpose of the role.
- **Person Specification (PS)** - Details the skills, personal qualities, knowledge, education, and experience required to fulfill the duties of the post successfully. Often the PS will also be divided into essential and desirable criteria, you should clearly demonstrate how you match ALL of the essential criteria (or as near to it as possible) and include examples of how you meet as many of the desirable criteria that you can too.

When an employer receives your application, they will use a 'checklist' to see how well you have matched all of the essential and desirable criteria listed within the PS and will see how effectively you have shown your ability to undertake the duties listed in the JD.

So, when writing your application, a good starting point is to print out both sets of documents highlighting key words that stand out to you. Then, ask yourself: what evidence do you have to ensure that you have addressed these criteria in your application? Make some notes as you go through. This is now a rough plan of what you intend to cover in your application.

Don't be afraid to mirror language used in the JD, PS or in other materials you have found about the organisation where appropriate. For example, if the employer refers to 'clients' you might choose to do the same when referring to your experience with customers if appropriate. It's important to make clear links between your experience and skills and those required for the role you are applying for.

Writing your personal statement

Many employers will ask you to complete a statement telling them why you are a suitable candidate for the job. This may be referred to as a 'Personal Statement', 'Supporting Statement' or 'Additional Information' section and may be a page/box to write in. You will usually be given some guidance about how many words to write. This is one of the most important aspects of your application and so it is vital to use this space effectively.

This is an example of how the supporting section of an application form might be introduced:

Candidate Reference Number	
<p>SUPPORTING STATEMENT</p> <p>With reference to the job description and person specification, please use this space to tell us your reasons for applying for the post; how your experience and skills support your application and any other information you believe is relevant. You should demonstrate clearly how, and to what extent, you meet each element of the specification. Please do not include any supplementary material (such as a CV) as this will not be considered as part of your application. Use no more than 2 pages to complete your response.</p> <p>Please continue on a separate sheet if necessary</p>	

- First, write your personal statement offline in Microsoft Word. Never write your statement directly into an online application in case the internet crashes and you lose all your work. This will also enable you to spell check with confidence as you write.
- Keep the JD and PS in front of you at all times. The PS is likely to have essential and desirable criteria which the employer is looking for in candidates. In deciding who to interview, selection panels will commonly assess applications against these criteria and you need to demonstrate that you meet as many of them as possible.
- One way to demonstrate how well you match the criteria is to begin by using a table format in which you list the criteria and then your examples of how you meet them. This is a two-stage process in which you first use the table to ensure that you cover as much of the person specification as possible and then convert that initial information into action orientated language which includes your evidence or examples.

An example of how to start this process:

The table below shows how a candidate has started to map out her ideas to demonstrate how she meets the requirements of the person specification:

Person specification for the 'Project Worker' role	My experiences/knowledge and skills
Qualifications	
Qualified to Degree level.	• <i>Studying for BA in Psychology and Sociology at Bath Spa University</i>
Knowledge and Experience	
Awareness of the housing and support needs of young single homeless people. Experience of working with socially excluded clients or similar work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Two years working as a volunteer at Julian House drop-in service: assisting with needs assessment and information interviews.</i> • <i>Spent informal time with clients encouraging engagement with the service.</i> • <i>Two weeks volunteering on the mentoring plus summer project: supporting teenagers affected by multiple deprivations and assessed as vulnerable to future involvement with the criminal justice system, to take part in sport and art activities.</i>

Person specification for the role	My experiences/knowledge and skills
<p>Commitment to working with outside agencies.</p> <p>Good developing knowledge of providers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Updated Julian house list of external agencies, training providers and support organisations.</i> • <i>Carried out research to find appropriate referral organisation for individuals attending the drop-in.</i> • <i>Made phone calls to outside agencies to get information for clients.</i>
<p>Working knowledge /understanding of Housing and welfare benefits framework.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Used the government pages to support clients at Julian House.</i> • <i>My dissertation will look at the impact of recent changes to the welfare system; in particular I will be looking to examine the impact of the so-called 'bed-room' tax on disabled claimants and their families. This will involve detailed research and information gathering from various government agencies and sources.</i>
<p>Able to work on own initiative.</p> <p>Ability to contribute effectively to the organisation's operational plan.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Suggested new system for recording external agency contacts which was taken up at Julian House.</i> • <i>Organised the "Young Run" to raise money and awareness of mentoring plus - aiding their goal to raise funds and attract new mentors.</i>
<p>Computer literate with knowledge of Word, Excel and Outlook</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Effective IT skills and am confident using Word, PowerPoint, Excel, Outlook: use Microsoft office throughout my degree for essays and presentations.</i> • <i>Used Excel and Outlook to organise and track details of contacts and budget of the Young Run mentioned above.</i>
Skills and abilities	
<p>Ability and willingness to work flexible hours. Prepared to work every other weekend.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Excellent track record of working flexibly and going above and beyond when needed.</i> • <i>Worked late shifts and weekends regularly during part-time work for Tesco.</i> • <i>I have a broad skill base and the flexibility to adapt my role within a team at short notice, for instance stepping up to lead an Art group when team members were ill.</i>
<p>Excellent interpersonal and communication skills.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Consistently produced a high standard of written work across formats:</i> • <i>Essays, mentee action plans, reports, case studies, letters.</i> • <i>Excellent verbal communication skills with individuals and groups.</i> • <i>Experience of: listening and one-to-one skills, communicating to a group, giving instructions for a workshop, presentation skills. Communicating with a wide range of individuals: social workers, employers, voluntary organisations, clients with - mental health problems, social isolation, English as a foreign language.</i>
<p>Excellent organisational skills with an ability to maintain administration systems and prioritise workloads.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Meeting deadlines and prioritise work while managing a high workload of university course, part-time work and volunteering.</i> • <i>Organisation of fundraising event involving swift, accurate written records and communication of all decisions, clear timetabling of actions to be taken by the five team members. Used Google Docs and Outlook to keep all members of the team up-to-date.</i>

- When writing your personal statement, you may find it helpful dividing it up into sections, such as Skills, Experience and Knowledge. Under each heading you'll need to demonstrate the competency the organisation is seeking. The employer may have divided the PS into particular named sections and therefore it may be appropriate to use these headings to help structure your statement.
- It isn't enough simply to state you're a 'team player.' All statements must be supported by evidence (see 'Using STAR' section below). When an organisation gives a list of essential and desirable criteria in the PS, aim to explain how you meet each one. Don't assume that an employer knows what your degree or previous job roles have involved – it is your job to concisely describe your most relevant knowledge and skills to help the employer understand your achievements.
- As well as proving how you meet the criteria, your statement can also show your motivation and understanding of the role and organisation. One way to achieve this is to link back to the question (i.e. how you are a suitable candidate for the role) throughout your statement. For example if evidencing customer service skills for a Charity Advisor role, you could conclude your paragraph with *"Ensuring that vulnerable clients feel welcomed is crucial to aims of the advice service, and I would be keen to apply my customer service skills to this in the role."* This is a much more effective way of demonstrating motivation than clichés such as *"I have always wanted to work for your charity"* which can feel unsubstantiated and false to an employer.
- It is important to follow any instructions you are given, particularly relating to word count. There is no 'magic answer' to the question 'how long should a personal statement be?' But as a guide, a paragraph per criteria is on average what you'll need to convince the employer of your abilities in a meaningful way. Please note that you may be able to combine similar/overlapping criteria when describing your evidence in each paragraph.

Using STAR

To provide evidence of how you meet each competency, try using the STAR approach. This helps you to provide a structured and concise description to demonstrate a skill or competency. STAR enables you to describe briefly the **Situation** you were in, the **Task(s)** you had to do, and fully showcases the **Actions** you took and the final **Results** you achieved.

For example – demonstrating event management experience:

- **Situation:** I have two years recent event management experience for my student fundraising group.
- **Task:** In my first and second year, I was responsible for coordinating 15 events for 5 charities.
- **Action:** So that I kept on track and met all my event targets and objectives I created a timeline. I shared the timeline on Google Docs, so that the whole team could keep each other up-to-date;
- **Result:** my team said the accessibility of the timeline made their job easier. In the end, I managed my time so successfully that the events ran on time, within budget, and raising over £8,000 for charity.

For example - can you provide an example of a time when you have had to co-ordinate the work of other people?

- **Situation:** I was Social Secretary of the Environmental Awareness Society on my university campus.
- **Task:** We decided to mark Green Week last February by organising a programme of social and cultural events representing different environmental themes.

- **Action:** I took responsibility for finding people willing to get involved: some were members of our own Society but I also approached other societies and organisations on campus and promoted the benefits of being involved to make sure that all 5 of our chosen themes were represented. Once I had enough people willing to contribute I was responsible for drawing up a programme of events for each day and coordinated regular meetings to monitor progress and address any potential problems. I also organised resources and room bookings to ensure we had the right space available for each event.
- **Result:** During the week there were 9 different events running, from a sustainable breakfast with Fairtrade coffee and cereals through films, lectures and a beach clean. Over a hundred students took part in them and the Society signed 20 new members.

Remember to use a variety of examples as evidence to show a breadth of scenarios, drawing from all aspects of your life (if relevant), such as work, university, school, societies, clubs, volunteering. The 'Action' is the most important aspect of this description; take time to use positive and active language to celebrate your achievements. You can find additional information about effectively using STAR and see further examples in our '**Guide to Using the STAR Approach**'.

Be aware

Sometimes an application form will not allow you to write at great length because of the number of criteria that are being asked for. If that is the case you may need to write in a shorter bullet point style; it will still be important to use positive language, be specific and do a spelling and grammar check.

Application forms may also be screened by an automated system which carefully selects applications based on word choice. Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS) scan and collect data from CVs and job applications. The increased use of these systems means that simple formatting, plain headings, and the use of key words (pulled from the job description and person specification) and 'power words and phrases' can greatly increase an applicant's success at this early stage of selection. So, remember this as you complete your application and ensure that you match and mirror as many criteria, keywords and behaviours as possible.

Application form questions

Common questions might be:

- 'Why have you applied for this job?'
- 'Why do you want to work for this organisation?'
- 'What do you think the job involves?'

Give some thought to your answers, refer back to your research and the PS and try to make your answers as interesting as possible. The more thoughtful and considered your answers, the more the employer will want to read about what a great match you are.

You may also be asked to answer 'competency-based questions' on the application form. These questions will tend to focus on the essential competencies of the job role. They are likely to ask you to describe situations where you have demonstrated particular skills e.g. communication skills, commercial awareness, teamwork and problem solving. Some example questions:

- Can you demonstrate your ability to plan and organise work, including methods for monitoring progress and ensuring deadlines are met?
- Describe a situation where you had to work effectively as a member of the team. What were the team's aims? How was the team selected? What was your role?
- Have you experience of developing and delivering excellent customer service and being responsible for the resolution of customer problems?
- Can you give examples of systems and/or processes that you have developed for your team to achieve improvements and respond to change?
- Can you give examples of how you have successfully used your communication skills to elicit opinions, and/or to gain acceptance of your view, and to establish positive working relationships?
- Can you give examples of how you have ensured that your team works effectively together and understands the needs of others?
- Have you experience of working as a senior member of a team or of leading projects/key activities, including supporting colleagues to achieve objectives?

It is important to use specific examples and say what you did, how you did it and what the results were to show the employer your capabilities. Again, you can use the STAR technique to help you structure your answers – see additional resource '**Guide to Using the STAR Approach**'.

It is vital to fully use the word count to answer the question effectively. The word count also gives you an indication of what sort of depth the employer is looking for.

This is an example of how these questions might look on an application form:

What character traits do you think would be:

a) beneficial in this role

b) negative in this role

c) Give examples of when you have displayed these attributes, including those you've listed as negative

Hobbies, interests and other information

If you are asked about your hobbies and interests use this as an opportunity to show the employer what skills and competencies you have developed in your spare time, matched to those required by the role. This is also a chance to individualise your application and convey what drives and motivates you.

References

You are likely to be asked for the names of two or possibly three people who can be a reference. This means selecting the most appropriate people to endorse you for this particular role or scheme. There are three types of references:

- **Academic** – could be your course leader, module leader, dissertation supervisor or personal tutor.
- **Professional** – could be a current or former manager from work or voluntary positions.
- **Personal/Character** – could be a friend of the family or colleague. This will need to be someone who has known you a long time and can talk about you in a way that shows your ability to do the job. Ideally they should be working in some professional position - banker, teacher, doctor etc. It might be someone who supervised you in some way – community art group, youth group leader, director of an orchestra you played for, sports coach for a team you've played for etc.

The key point is that the referee should know you well enough to be able to write positively about you. They should also know you relatively recently – an employer or tutor that you haven't seen for five years won't be able to say much about your present development. On your form you will need to clearly state in what capacity the referees know you.

Employers may give you the opportunity to indicate at what stage in the application process that your references can be contacted e.g. 'not before interview'. Wherever possible, make contact with your references to ask their permission in advance, and ideally make them aware of the types of opportunity you are applying for.

If you have not had contact with your reference for a while, then it might be helpful to provide them with a brief reminder of what you have been involved with most recently e.g. relevant modules, outside interests, work experience or volunteering so that they have an understanding of you now.

Check, check and check again

Remember to refer back to any guidance notes that the employer has provided to ensure that you have followed ALL instructions carefully.

CHECK 1: Once you've completed the application, read through everything carefully. Have you matched all of the criteria you can within your personal statement and competency questions? Do the examples you have provided to demonstrate your skills make sense to someone who doesn't know you? Check you have supplied information accurately and that your contact details are correct.

- Do you need to give them term time and home contact details?
- Is your e-mail address appropriate and professional?
- Have you completed ALL of the sections you are asked to complete?

Check your job application very carefully to make sure no errors have slipped in. Poor grammar and spelling mistakes could ruin your chances of creating a good impression.

CHECK 2: Get another person to look through your application if you can.

CHECK 3: Print out a completed copy of the form. Proof-read it again and, assuming everything is perfect, keep it for future reference. You may find the example you've created for your personal statement can be adapted for other future applications. You will also find it very useful to have a copy of what you submitted ready for your interview.

Common mistakes

- Spelling mistakes. Although “do a final spell check” sounds like an obvious action, employers repeatedly report that candidates submit applications with errors in spelling and grammar and that this is a reason for rejecting an application.
- Making applications that are too generic – applications need to be tailored to the specific role and employer. Employers can tell when information has been copied and pasted from another application without making appropriate/relevant changes.
- Not using the personal specification as your guide and showing very little knowledge of the organisation within your application. Employers need to be able to ‘check off’ how well you match the person specification and job description and need to get a sense of how enthusiastic you are about working for them.
- Using too much description; too little reflection when responding to competency questions. To overcome this – use the STAR approach.
- Using clichés e.g. “*I have always dreamt of working for such an amazing organisation*” – have you? Really? Think about how you can link your own experiences, interests and values to your interest in working with this employer. What have you got to contribute?

Top tips

- Give yourself plenty of time to fill in the job application. Make sure you note the closing date; don't leave it to the last minute!
- Download all of the job details – the job description and person specification – so that you can continue to refer to these even when the job is no longer advertised online.
- Always complete a draft first. Work on your answers in a word document before copying and pasting into the actual form, this will allow you to do a spell check and monitor your word count.
- Save online applications regularly and make a note of your log-in details.
- Make sure you use key words and ‘power words and phrases’ to demonstrate how you match the employers’ essential criteria – for help with this see the ‘power words’ bank in our ‘**Guide to CVs**’.
- Answer **all** the questions and follow the instructions carefully i.e. follow the word count, use black ink etc. If you're asked to complete all boxes – then ensure that you write N/A (i.e. not applicable) for those which are not relevant.
- If the employer says you can attach a CV make sure that your CV is tailored to the role that you are applying for and highlights relevant experience. If they tell you not to send a CV, then don't.
- Get someone else to check your application for errors in the form including spelling or grammar.
- Keep a copy of the final version of your application form (and the PS & JD for the role). It will be a useful reference for future applications and you will need to review all of these documents if you are invited for interview.

Additional resources to help you

Completing applications

- <https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/applications-and-cvs/271309-the-graduates-guide-to-job-application-forms> - TargetJobs advice
- www.prospects.ac.uk/applying_for_jobs_example_questions_and_answers.htm - Applying for jobs advice with example competency questions from Prospects
- www.prospects.ac.uk/applying_for_jobs_write_a_successful_job_application.htm - Advice when applying for jobs from Prospects
- <https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/applications-and-cvs/271417-writing-tips-for-graduates-how-to-communicate-with-recruiters> - writing tips from TargetJobs
- www.totaljobs.com/careers-advice/cv-and-cover-letter/application-sample - example competency questions and answers for applications
- www.totaljobs.com/careers-advice/cvs-and-applications/why-application-forms - article explaining why employers use application forms when they recruit
- <https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/applications-and-cvs/271455-writing-last-minute-graduate-job-applications> - Writing last minute applications - advice from TargetJobs
- <https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/applications-and-cvs/271449-dealing-with-gaps-in-graduate-cvs-and-applications> - Dealing with gaps in your applications from TargetJobs
- www.essex.ac.uk/careers/essexapplication/documents/competency-based_form.pdf - example application form for reference from Essex University Careers pages

Guidance notes - employer examples

- www.jobs.nhs.uk/advice/info/Completing_an_application.pdf - Example of guidance notes - NHS resource taking you through steps to make an online application (with the NHS)
- www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/128968/competency-guidance.pdf - employer specific guide but useful tips and advice about how to approach competency statements (this example relates to jobs within government)

Further Support from Bath Spa Careers

If you would like further support from Bath Spa Careers & Employability go to bathspa.ac.uk/careers to see the ways in which you can access our service, including workshops and events, appointments and to access our extensive range of resources.

You can also contact Careers Reception on 01225 875525 or at careers@bathspa.ac.uk.

Please note that Bath Spa Careers does not endorse particular organisations.

(This guide was last updated in Summer 2019).

GET A HEAD START

We're here to help you get a great start to your career. We're open all year round, so come and visit us in the Careers Space, book an appointment, or get in touch.

Careers Space, SL.G04
Steward's Lodge

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www.bathspa.ac.uk/careers

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