



How do I get started in a career in development?

By Jonathan Pryke
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Careers in development

Jonathan Pryke

Note

This discussion paper is not written by a careers expert. It is rather a work in progress based on my own experiences trying to start a career in development with extensive input from colleagues that have many more years of experience. The objective of this paper is to start a conversation about careers in development and is not intended as a comprehensive or prescriptive careers resource. It will be progressively updated with feedback and broader input. Because this is based around my own experiences it will be somewhat Canberra focused, though the lessons and opportunities can, by and large, be replicated across Australia (and beyond). If there are any omissions please [contact me](#). This [blog](#) also pulls together a great variety of posts addressing development careers. A special thanks to all of my colleagues at Devpolicy for their valuable insights.

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There are lots and lots of young Australians interested in development. [Oaktree](#) has thousands of members. The [Australian Medical Students Association](#) attracts some 500 medical students to its annual Global Health Conference. Development studies and international relations are amongst the most popular undergraduate university courses in Australia. How this young and enthusiastic generation can get started in a career in development is an important question. And it is one that I have tried to answer in my new [Devpolicy discussion paper](#).

Based on my own experience and drawing on extensive consultation, the paper aims to start a conversation about what a career in development actually is, what you can do to better your chances of getting started and where you can look. The paper is by no means comprehensive or prescriptive and is intended to evolve over time with feedback and comments.

Instead of trying to summarise in this blog what has turned into quite an extensive exercise, I want to tell you my story, as someone just beginning a career in development, and share some tips that have certainly helped me in my career to date.

I am 25 years old and have aspired to a career in development for some time now. My path has not been linear and has been littered with some significant failures, changes of direction and crises of confidence. My passion to work in development was inspired largely by 6 months I spent in Laos during my undergraduate taking part in a very informal development internship with a Technical Assistance program sponsored by the Asian Development Bank and the European Commission (facilitated through a family connection). This experience helped me to realise (which has been confirmed by my colleagues) how important volunteering abroad is for an extended period of time, and how great opportunities such as the [AYAD](#) program are for facilitating that. Even if you don't manage to do a lot of good, spending a substantial amount of time in a developing country will also help you to decide if this kind of career is what you really want (remembering that a career in development is not the only way to do good in the world).

This internship experience aside, by the time I made it to the end of my undergraduate degree (a Bachelor of Commerce from Sydney University) I had not been proactive enough and was still lacking direction and opportunities. It was at this point that I turned to more study (this time at the ANU, a dual Master's in Public Policy and Diplomacy) to not only improve my chances of getting into graduate programs (such as AusAID), but also to gain more experience and a better feeling about what I wanted to do. Pursuing further study was one of the best decisions I have ever made. Some people get into development as generalists. But obtaining a specialization, whether it's in economics or medicine, international relations or community development, is normally a good pre-requisite. Postgraduate study not only has made me more employable and productive, it also exposed me to a whole new network (networking is also very important) and eventually led to the opportunity of working at Devpolicy.

Upon moving to Canberra I also started volunteering (and still do) at organisations such as Oaktree and engaging in development outside of the classroom. I wish I had done this much sooner. Volunteering, both at home and abroad, is the singularly most important thing you can do to demonstrate your commitment, highlight your passion for development and expose you to similar like-minded people. It is also very rewarding. And it can make a difference.

I also began applying to various positions here in Canberra. It is really important to cast a wide net when you get started, as there are multiple ways to get started in the development industry. Applying for jobs gives you vital experience in application and employment processes where, particularly at the interview stage, you will certainly get better with practice. To illustrate this point, I have applied for the AusAID graduate program twice, and

both times I have been rejected. The first time I didn't make it though the first round, while the second time (after my first year of Master's) I made it to the interview. It was the first in a string of graduate interviews I did that year and the first formal interview I had ever done. To say I was nervous was an understatement. Of the four interviews I did that year I was accepted into the other three (including treasury and DFAT), and I attribute a lot of that success to prior interview experience.

My failures illustrate a final point that I think is vitally important. You have to be persistent and keep an open mind. Every rejection is brutal, but the more it happens the more you realise how many pathways into development there really are. When moving to Canberra I would have never expected to be working where I am today. If I hadn't been persistent and kept myself open to new opportunities I doubt I would be anywhere close to what I have achieved to date.

The story I have highlighted above is a very personal one. And it's just one example. I plan in the coming months to provide a series of interviews and discussions with development professionals from all sectors and points in their careers. We would also like to hear your stories, either through comments below or contacting [me](#) directly. Getting started in a career in development is tough, but hopefully this resource can make it that little bit easier.

This is a part of our blog series 'Careers in Development'. The rest of the series can be found [here](#).

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About the author/s

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Jonathan Pryke worked at the Development Policy Centre from 2011, and left in mid-2015 to join the Lowy Institute, where he is now Director of the Pacific Islands Program. He has a Master of Public Policy/Master of Diplomacy from Crawford School of Public Policy and the College of Diplomacy, ANU.

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