

Outreach Program Officer

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What does an Outreach Program Officer do?

My job can be called many names depending on the University the role is employed. It could be called Engagement Officer, School Liaison Officer, STEM Engagement Officer or Outreach Ambassador. I work for the University of Queensland and consequently my role as Outreach Program Officer involves raising tertiary aspirations of high school students in the Ipswich/Lockyer Valley regions.



What do you work in and what is your speciality?

I create and deliver workshops, activities, and presentations to engage high school students in pursuing university pathways and also provide them with skills to improve their school studies. I'm not bound by curriculum's and school schedules, and can speak to up to 3,000 students per month! Most Australian universities employ a team of professional staff to engage high school students in areas identified as priority areas by the university. This priority could be an educational area like STEM, or like in my specific role, a geographical area. My speciality is creating interesting workshops that complement different curriculum areas of high school subjects. I try to create a broad range of workshops and activities that relate back to targeted degrees that give students an insight into university study. My qualifications were in ecology and biology, so my favourite workshop topics are in these areas.

How did you become interested in this area and when did you first start?

In the first year of my university career I applied for a casual job as a STEM Student Ambassador to run science workshops with high school students. It looked like a fun job and judging by the position description, it beat my existing casual job at a bike shop hands down for flexibility and pay. I began working in this role at the beginning of my second year. During the recruitment process for the STEM Ambassador job, I ended up being offered a few other casual roles within the university which involved talking and engaging with high school students. Throughout my time at university I worked part time with a number of departments and gradually proved myself as a responsible and capable employee. This led to more opportunities for me within the university and I was able to develop a number of my hobbies into professional skills such as photography, videography, public speaking, and most importantly science communication.

What study path have you taken to get here?

I originally started a Bachelor of Applied Science at Queensland University of Technology with a plan of majoring in Geology. As I progressed through my first year subjects I realised that my passion actually lay in environmental issues, and at the end of my first year decided to major in environmental science and ecology. During this time, I also worked part time as a student ambassador which allowed me to assist with coordinating university run camps, speak at large events and forums run by organisations such as ZONTA and Queensland Mineral and Energy Academy, travel to a number of remote areas in Queensland to run workshops and engage students in STEM, and develop STEM workshops alongside brilliant researchers and teachers. During my undergraduate degree I also studied a semester in Northern California as part of an exchange program. After my undergraduate degree, I was invited to apply for honours. After a very intense year, I received first class honours for my project in population genetics. However I still wasn't sure what my next step was and I applied for my current job on a whim while I was also filling out PhD applications. To my surprise I was offered the job because of my work experience as a student ambassador. I've now realised my strengths are in communications rather than research and have decided to make this my career.

What do you like most about your job?

My favourite part of my job is creating and delivering activities for students. I love seeing a project through from the original conception to then finally presenting it to students and getting their real time feedback. Nailing an activity is truly the best feeling, the excitement and engagement of the students is contagious!

Do you have any particular career highlights?

During my time as an honours student I began volunteering with an organisation called Wonder of Science. Wonder of Science takes STEM research students to rural and remote locations to engage local students and teachers in STEM education. My first ever trip with Wonder of Science was to Palm Island and that would have to be one of the biggest highlights so far. The students were so lovely and interested in the topics we discussed and I ended up making a short video out of it! As the University is a major partner with Wonder of Science and my managers are very supportive, I can still give some of my time while working full time as an Outreach program Officer

What advice would you give to someone interested in working in this area?

Diversify. Your degree doesn't define you. All of your hobbies, interests, and extracurricular activities are constituents of what you are, not just your GPA or OP. Especially in the current job climate where roles and industries are changing rapidly, the more skills you have the more likely you are to have a job. In my job particularly, soft skills such as public speaking and simply being able to write an email counts for a lot (both of which I didn't learn in a classroom). Both school and university are environments designed for you to try new things and hone your skills in new areas with no consequences, so I suggest take full advantage of it. Take risks and try new things!