What is an internship?

- Temporary position emphasising education instead of employment. Usually college or university students or other young adults. Can also be later in life, playing an important role in continuing education and career change.

- In general: short-term period of student work, under supervision, allowing for workplace experience and practical application of academic knowledge.
Work experience: “means different things to different people but in essence it is any form of work that you do before you start your career.”
(National Council for Work Experience, UK)

Internships in universities

• Formal: part of curriculum
• Informal: undertaken independently

• US/Canada: Northeastern, Waterloo
• UK: Surrey, Scottish universities
Background

• ‘Student employability’: 75% of US & UK students attend university in order to get a better job. (*The American Freshman, The National Student Survey*)

• Learning about companies and occupations: 68% prefer to learn in an internship. (Universum, 2010)

Background

• Over 75% of UK students would take up an internship if available. (CBI, 2009)

• 95% of students who completed an internship said it was ‘very useful’. (CBI, 2009)
• UK: ‘The importance of undertaking a period of work experience or providing opportunities is growing since demand is rising. Employers want to recruit graduates who have some knowledge of the working world and this is something that students are becoming more aware of.’ (NCWE)

The ‘flip side’: Employers

• Internships as a ‘pipeline’ to ‘try before you buy’

• 90% of all employers offer formal internships (NACE, 2010)
• Education systems under pressure to provide training for future knowledge workers

• Industry under pressure to offer more opportunities, including internships

Employability: many definitions

• ‘the qualities needed to maintain employment and progress in the workplace’ (AGCAS, 2010)

• ‘a set of achievements - skills, understandings and personal attributes - that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations’ (Yorke & Knight, 2004)
Graduate skills

• ‘the expertise, ability or competence to undertake specific activities, often acquired through formal instruction or work experience’ (Brown et al. 2001)

‘Transferable skills’

• Intellectual skills (e.g. critical, analytical, synthesising and problem-solving skills)
• Communication skills (written and oral)
• Organisational skills (e.g. working independently, taking initiative, time-management)
• Interpersonal skills (e.g. working with or motivating others, flexibility/adaptability)
• Three-quarters of all US university students complete at least one internship as compared to 1 in 36 in 1980. (Vault, 2004.)

Existing research?

• Studies that examine the final transition from university to full-time work
• Economic returns of internships/work experience
• Focus on how universities should adapt to employers’ needs
• Little research evidence that internships contribute to higher education curriculum
• HOWEVER, it does relate to a more positive view of the learning experience and higher employment rates (Blackwell et al, 2001)

Internships and academic performance
• Significant differences and improvement
  – Greater motivation
  – Improved performance
  – Enhanced teaching
  (Duignan, 2003)
• Workplaces enhance maturity, reliability (females benefit more?)
  (Mandilaras, 2004)

• Benefits in connection between university course and internship:
  Students rank this lowest
  (Duignan, 2003)

Measuring learning outcomes

• Links between institutions and employers
• Increased employment rates
• Increased student satisfaction/personal development
• Curriculum or program development
Making sense of internships

• Transition rather than transfer
• Developing expertise where learning is mediated differently
• Successful students are those who have some prior preparation

Eraut’s Learning Factors

- Challenge and value of work
- Support and feedback
- Confidence and commitment
Eraut’s Contextual Factors

- Allocation and structuring of work
- Relationships with people at work
- Individual expectations and progress at work

Considerations

- **Formal internships:** poorly structured or inappropriately supervised

- **Universities should configure placements and determine learning outcomes specific to that institution**
• Embedded, project-oriented, or ad-hoc
• Quality monitoring, student reflection
• Assessment and accreditation
• ‘High-impact’ activities (Association of American Colleges & Universities/NSEE)

‘The fortunate student gains from formal education the techniques and habits of abstraction, system thinking, experimentation and collaboration - all of which are prerequisites for a lifetime of creative problem solving. From then on, learning comes from doing.

Robert Reich -
(The Work of Nations, 1992)
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