

Internships between Higher Education and Work: Theoretical considerations and analysis for reflection

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Internships between Higher Education and Work: Theoretical considerations and analysis for reflection

There is a general acknowledgement that getting experience in the field before graduation is crucial not only for a seamlessly transition into the workplace, but also for enhancing graduates' career progression and prospects for employment after graduation. In this respect, Higher Education institutions have been called to reconsider the boundaries between Higher Education and the world of work away from the classroom, and have developed mechanisms in the curriculum such **the internship work experience**, as the necessary link to achieve the above and provide students with the closest window into the labor market.

The "hands-on" work experiences in complex real-world contexts provided by internships are becoming a central strand of the curricula and syllabi in many undergraduate and graduate degree programs, and this connection between the academia and the world of work has been greatly appreciated not only by employers, but also by participant students who have claimed many benefits of this unique opportunity, including the enhancement of their academic, professional, and personal development.

Of course, in order to achieve these benefits in an effective and valuable way, several key elements need to be addressed. Such factors can influence the success or otherwise of the experience, reason for which its efficacy cannot be taken for granted.

In this preamble, the purpose of this term paper is intended, on the one hand, to capture and present a brief theoretical account of the supervised work experience under consideration, claimed as an employability signal that contribute to the development of a flexible, highly-skilled and enterprising labor force; and on the other, to provide a short descriptive analysis of its benefits, crucial key elements, and doubts about its efficacy, in order to reflect about the experience and its implications, the same that should be of interest to further research.

The structure of the remainder of the paper is as follow. The next section, chapter 1, makes a connection between employability and the role that Higher Education Institutions are playing in giving their graduates the closest windows into the world of work through internships work experiences. Chapter 2, in turn, details background information on internships. The text presents a definition of what an internship is and what is not, identifies the players and defines their responsibilities, addresses topics such as duration and categorization of internships, and briefly overviews new trends on internships experiences. In Chapter 3, some components of the internship experience are highlighted. The fourth part argues that getting an internship position is not an easy task for students in the current competitive environment in which host organizations are looking for quality intern candidates to take on. It also provides some tips to students and outlines some considerations when selecting the internship place. Chapter 5 addresses the value of

effective internships experiences by proving some benefits of the win-win situation that experiment all the stakeholders involved. Chapter 6, in turn, briefly discusses some key elements that are claimed as crucial in order to make the internship an effective and valuable work experience. Chapter 7 opens the debate of the internships' efficacy and provides some insights for reflection. The final section concludes.

Entering on the topics presented in these sections was possible through surveying a huge amount of meaningful documents and information available in electronic version. We also resorted to some papers and articles written by authors that have carried out research on the topics discussed here. Special attention was paid also to Internships Guidebooks from some Higher Education institutions.

1. Employability and the role of Higher Education Institutions: Making internships experiences necessary links

Employability has been considered in the modern knowledge-based society as a key player for underpinning the competitive advantage of the nations and their labor force (Gracia, 2009). According to the last author, this fact has stimulated much debate in the current political and economic arena, which has placed its development as a responsibility of Higher Education (HE). As a result, increasing expectations are being placed by government and employers on Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) for developing the professional skills need by their graduates for a seamlessly transition into the workplace ("The challenges of establishing an internship program," n.d.).

In this sense, Little and Harvey (2007) report that HEI's have been forced to reconsider the boundaries between HE and employment. This has implied changes for moving away from the exclusive provision of the exact nature of the perfect knowledge in the classroom, to the provision of a new broader range of attributes that could enable graduates to do the job in the real world of work (Harvey et al., 1997). The response for producing employable graduates via development of the individual abilities and skills of the students has been the incorporation of mechanisms such as supervised work experience into the curriculum (Gracia, 2009). Gomez et al. (2004) point out that one of the oldest and most effective approaches used by HEI's to do so are the **internships**. Thus, internships provide the experiences needed to enhance employability (Auburn, 2007). Of course, argue Little and Harvey (2007), Higher Education's relevance to employment is not necessarily limited to the explicit incorporation of such mechanism. However, there are claims that support that internships are indeed **employability signals** that contribute to the development of a flexible, highly-skilled and enterprising labor force (Blackwell et al., 2001).

Employers increasingly have positive views about graduates who have undertaken internships (Little & Harvey, 2007). Schambach and Dirks (2002), cited in Wilson (1997), remind us that internship experience is viewed as an important factor employers use in screening job applicants' resumes. Consistent with Wilson's statement, the Spring 2010

Survey of Career Center Professionals in the United States, revealed that students with internship experience have a significant competitive advantage in their quest for employment after graduation. Virtually all the survey respondents (98%) agreed that employers favor graduates who have had an internship experience over their peers who have not had one. Additionally, 96% agreed that the ones that do not have the internship experience are at a competitive disadvantage in the current labor market (Internships.com, 2010). Under such circumstances, it can be argued that internships are necessary links between HE and a career.

2. Getting to know internships

2.1. What is an internship?

The Internship Guidebook prepared by Magd and Al Ghazo (2009) defines the word as: “an active learning experience in which students learn by taking on a responsible role as a worker in an organization” (p.4).

The modern concept of internships essentially springs from the medieval “*apprenticeship*”. The difference is that internships are more exploratory, and students are not bound to work for the employers after the internship is over (although many students do receive job offers) (Internships.com, n.d.).

Another term often used for referring to this period students spend at a company for gaining work experience as part of their undergraduate or post-graduate degree course, is “*placement*”. Even though generally speaking both terms (internship and placement) have the same meaning, the difference springs basically from the type of industry the experience takes place, the duration and timing. Thus, an internship usually lasts from a week to 12 weeks, while placement refers to long or extended periods of time. In this same vein, internships are usually offered outside of university term time, and placements are usually held during university term time (WikiJob, n.d.).

The important connotation here is that this work experience should be supervised and in a career field of interest to the student. The experience provides an opportunity outside the classroom for these students to actively explore their interest, to gain practical expertise and to assess if they wish to further pursue a chosen field (St. Lawrence University Career Services, 2010).

All internships have the general goal of having students apply classroom learning, theories, and experiences into a professional setting (“Internships in Higher Education,” n.d.), in order to gain valuable work experience, information and new ideas on how to enhance his/her work performance (Caribbean Tourism Human Resource Council, 2004), shape their professional identities (Scholz et al., 2004), grow personally in terms of greater self-confidence and maturity (Duckenfield and Stirner: cited in Harvey et al. (1997) and develop a culture of adaptation to the real world of work (Harvey et al., 1997) by experience

environmental problems in complex real-world contexts (Scholz et al., 2004). Undoubtedly, all these outcomes bridge their gap from the academic to their professional working future (Magd & Al Ghazo, 2009), helping them towards their success in the labor market (Harvey et al., 1997).

Since internships are designed to supplement classroom learning with practical experience, they are often referred to as “**experiential learning**” (Internships.com, n.d.). According to Toncar and Cudmore (2000), this kind of learning that could take place both in the classroom and outside of the classroom –the latter as in the internships-, demonstrates that theory reflects practice and that practice reflects theory, providing a meaningful link between what is learned in the classroom and what is practiced in the professional arena. This experiential learning, apart from injecting reality, offers students the opportunity to apply and integrate what they have learned previously, concludes the authors.

2.2. What an internship is not: Looking at both sides of the coin

Internships are designed in principle to provide a positive learning experience that could help students move into the world of work (Sylver Lake College, 2010). In this sense, we should be cautious about what an internship cannot be considered for both, students and host organizations.

Considering the position of students, they should not view an internship as an experience in which learning is optional, “time-out” from university to go to work without any real responsibility, an environment to sit around and wait for instructions, “*an easy grade*”, a “*guarantee of a job offer*”, or even an experience that could not allow self-consciences about the learning derived (USM, 2010; The Intern Advocate, n.d.).

Taking into account now the side of the host organizations, the same should not consider the internships as a chance to have a little mini-me running around the office at their beck and call, a way of delegating tasks for which other employees are directly responsible, or even an opportunity to leverage “free labor” for a gap in an area in which the organization lacks basic skills or knowledge, or for performing all the routine or uninteresting work (USM, 2010; The Intern Advocate, n.d.).

2.3. Players in an internship learning experience and their responsibilities

The available literature on the topic points out that there are three main players in the internship learning experience: The intern, the mentor or on-site supervisor, and the faculty supervisor/advisor.

The **intern** is the student who will become a temporary member of the host organization (St. Lawrence University Career Services, 2010). The intern has to take the main responsibility in the practical learning experience, since his/her effort, interest and application will to determine to great extent how well the experience works and how much

he/she will benefit from it. He/she must take the work seriously at all times, giving full continuous attention to the agreed responsibilities while showing enthusiasm and willingness to learn and work, and displaying an optimistic and professional attitude at all times (Caribbean Tourism Human Resource Council, 2004). The latter include his/her adherence to all personnel rules, regulations, and other requirements of the host organization (USM, 2010, p. 10).

The **mentor or on-site supervisor** is another important player in the aforementioned learning experience. This is the person assigned by the host organization to supervise, coach, guide, support and assists on a daily basis the intern with achieving the internship goals and contribute to its success while evaluating the process and its results (Caribbean Tourism Human Resource Council, 2004). He/she must view the intern as someone to be trained and molded to the requirements of the particular industry (Auburn et al., 1993). To do so, he/she must be approachable, provide feedback, show appreciation for work that interns do, give interns advice on their career path, view reasonable mistakes as learning opportunities, gives interns the chance to learn new skills, etc. (St. Lawrence University Career Services, 2010).

Another important player pointed out by the literature is the **faculty supervisor/advisor**. This is the person that shapes and approves the interns' learning plan, monitors their progress, and with whom the same can share ideas before and during their internship experience (Caribbean Tourism Human Resource Council, 2004). Apart from that, he/she communicates with the mentor or on-site supervisor, evaluates the intern performance (in conjunction with the on-site supervisor), and determines the final grade for the internship (St. Lawrence University Career Services, 2010).

2.4. Duration of internships

According to the web site Internships.com (n.d.), the length of an internship is flexible, and can really be anything that is agreeable to both the student and the setting, but taking into account the university requirements. It also should consider the intern's circumstances and learning needs (Caribbean Tourism Human Resource Council, 2004, p.11). Harvey et al. (1997), in turn, point out that the student's academic program is also a determinant. They states that the length range from two weeks to a whole year, but claim that longer internship experiences are seen as preferable to short ones, first, because the host organization is looking for a return on its investment in training and staff time, and last but not least, the interns also can gain a worthwhile experience.

2.5. Categorization of internships

As the literature on internships emphasizes, there are some categorizations in this learning experience. Among these we noted the **credit and no-credit internship**, and the **paid and unpaid**.

As the Web site Internships.com (n.d.) argues, it is a common misconception that internships are always in exchange for university credit and part of the academic coursework. Thus, it is claimed by the same site that students also perform not-for-credit internships as part of their extracurricular plan to gain experience. This indicates a fundamental difference, in no-credit internships there are not measurable learning outcomes (“Internships in Higher Education,” n.d.). That is why both students and employers have a wide spread support for the credit bearing internship option (“The challenges of establishing an internship program,” n.d.), since this last option does have learning outcomes, sharing common goals and elements with on-campus study, which include reading, writing, critical thinking, and problem solving (“Internships in Higher Education,” n.d.).

Following the categorization, internships may also be classified and arranged as either a **paid** or **unpaid** experience. According to the Internship Guidebook 2010-2011 of the Sylver Lake College, the payment or not of the internship depends upon the organization and arrangements made (Sylver Lake College, 2010). Due to the fact that the primary purpose of an internship is the learning experience, and money definitely is not be the first consideration in a experience where the commitment and dedication shown to the field is supposed to be more important than the desire of financial gain, some organizations do not provide remuneration, assuring in this regard that the valuable experience and even the academic credit the interns gain is compensation enough for the internship experience (St. Lawrence University Career Services, n.d.). Under such circumstances, the labor guidelines and federal laws of some countries such as the U.S, mandate that these unpaid interns must not benefit the host organization economically or be used to displace the work done by paid employees (Internships.com, n.d.). This same source continues claiming in this terrain that despite of not receiving remuneration or alternative compensation by their work, unpaid interns should not forget that they are still making a solid investment in their career future by pursuing the internship, so they still need to take advantages of all the possibilities they could have in order to maximize their internship experience without expecting a possible remuneration.

The issue of the payment is often controversial, and there are advocates who believe that host organizations should you pay their interns arguing that paid internships represent a win-win, where not only the intern “wins” because they are able to obtain meaningful and value-added work experience via a paid role, but also the employers “wins” by having their business agenda and stalled projects advanced and off the shelf (The Intern Advocate, n.d.).

2.6. New trends on internships experiences

2.6.1. Rotational internships

Rotational internships are internship programmes in which the interns rotate between various departments of the host organization or between various roles within a single department. This variation is becoming popular because interns are exposed to an even more diverse range of roles and responsibilities, allowing them to assess their skills and interest in a number of positions, while employers can try out several of them in various roles as a way to evaluate future employees (Internships.com, n.d.).

2.6.2. Virtual internships

Virtual internships are new options that allow host organizations to think outside the internship box. Here, interns work remotely—at school, home, library and so on—rather than in the company's office (Internships.com, n.d.). By working remotely, the intern can be in a different state, or even a different country. Anywhere he/she can get a reliable internet connection is his/her office – a virtual office (The Intern Advocate, n.d.). One of the benefits for host organizations is that they are able to hire and retain the best interns for the program regardless of location and scheduling (Internships.com, n.d.).

According to The Intern Advocate (n.d.), these kinds of internships fit well in sectors such as social media, marketing, advertising, web development, public relations, digital media, editorial and accounting. As virtual interns often work alone as they complete their assignments, they should have key characteristics such as resiliency, independence, leadership and perhaps the most critical: self-discipline, concludes the source.

3. Components of the internship experience

3.1. The learning plan and learning objectives

The learning plan is the tool that allows the intern, first, to plan the personal learning objectives for the internship according to different categories of learning, such as knowledge goals, professional goals, technical goals, and cultural goals; second, track and guide the complete learning work experience; and finally, evaluate the same at the end of the period ("Internships in Higher Education," n.d.).

The learning plan is considered the best way to ensure that the intern will get maximum benefit from the internship, since it not only details the outcomes and expectations of all concerned, but also includes the learning objectives the intern hopes to achieve, the specifications that have to be engaged in to meet them, the resource requirements needed in achieving the same, and how the intern and the host organization will demonstrate that the desired skills and competencies have been acquired (Caribbean Tourism Human Resource Council, 2004).

According to Bransford et al. (1999), the already mentioned learning objectives have the main purpose of integrating theory and research learned in the classroom with the

practical experiences encountered in the internship. Von Dras and Miller (2002), state that it is important the conversation and discussion of the same prior the internship, and their scaffolding according to the intern's abilities and skills. Apart from that, it is argued that they must be concise and measurable in order to provide clear direction for all parties about what is intended to be accomplished during the internship, and in this way reduce the possibility of misunderstanding and disappointment (Internweb.com, 2011). Measurable learning objectives combine the following four major variables to form a single sentence: Activity, forecast, time frame and evaluation (Sweet Briar College, n.d.).

3.2. The internship agreement

After the learning plan and learning objectives are agreed and negotiated at the outset, an internship agreement between all parties must be signed. This agreement usually covers the following areas: The description and goals of the internship, duration (commencement and completion dates), remuneration offered (where applicable), hours of work, contact details, intern obligations, reporting, termination, adherence to the rules of the property, and termination or dismissal (Caribbean Tourism Human Resource Council, 2004). In the case some circumstances change during the internship – as could happens-, then the intern, the university and the host organization need to renegotiate the contract (“The challenges of establishing an internship program,” n.d.).

3.3. Reflection

As stated in the article Internships in Higher Education – Goals, structure, process, standards (n.d.), reflection is an essential element of any internship, since the experience without this essential component is just experience. The article continues emphasizing that experiential learning occurs when there is a fusion of theory, practice, and reflection. In this way, reflection allows interns to integrate what they are learning and doing at the internship site with what they have learned in the classroom, concludes the cited source.

Von Dras and Miller (2002) agree that opportunities for verbal and written reflection should be provided in order to further enhance the quality of the internship experience. In this way, they recommend a regular, one hour, bi-weekly one-on-one meeting of the intern with the faculty supervisor/advisor to discuss internship experiences and relevant issues. Through these meetings, the faculty supervisor/advisor will be also able to gather evidence that will allow a better understanding of how best to serve the intern's needs and assist in his/her learning.

3.4. Evaluation

The evaluation is another important component of an internship experience in order to know what has been learned. As stated by Internweb.com (2011), the internship can only

be a true learning experience if constructive feedback is provided. This evaluation, adds the source, should be always based against the interns' learning objectives that were identified at the start of the internship.

There are a variety of ways for evaluating the intern's progress and achievement in the internship. These include a mentor or on-site supervisor confidential evaluation near the end of the internship experience to know how well the intern performed, a intern's self-evaluation to know his/her perspective on how well he/she performed, a learning journal of reflections developed by the intern, a visit to the work site by the faculty supervisor/advisor, a paper, and a portfolio of work products developed by the intern. It is advisable that the student and his/her faculty supervisor/advisor negotiate the specifics for each internship (Marian University Career and Graduate School Services, 2010).

4. Getting an internship

As stated by Internship Guidebook 2009-2010 of the Walnut Hill College (n.d.), "it is not always easy to find an internship. There are many factors that can complicate the search. The process of finding a position often becomes like a job itself" (p. 9). The Intern Advocate (n.d.) reminds us that host organizations are looking for quality intern candidates to take on. The last thing they want to do is make a bad hire and end up with more work on their plate than they anticipated, sarcastically points out the source. In this way, most host organizations -which are also making an investment in their future- have become extremely selective hirers in a climate where the stakes of choosing the wrong candidate are, thus, especially high (Internships.com, n.d.).

The internet site Internweb.com (2011) advises students using a professional career portfolio that could help them move to the top of the internship candidate pile. This portfolio that goes beyond a cover letter and resume, provides direct evidence of the student related accomplishments. In this way, points out the above source, employers can have a "snapshot" of the his/her achievements to date, the type of work they have done, and the type of employee they will be. Other tips provided by Internweb.com that are useful in the process of getting the position are: get experience through school activities, first step internships, school projects, etc.; learn to write a "power resume"; learn to write a "power cover letter"; practice interviewing skills; and sending a follow-up thank you letter. Of course, stresses the cited source, students need a little bit of luck and fate in all they do in order to get the internship of their dream.

In the process of finding that desired position, students should also resort to all the available sources, including their own networking, job fairs, internet searches (Sylver Lake College, 2010), and internship databases being promoted by *Career Services Offices* (St. Lawrence University Career Services, 2010).

At the moment of considering the internship site, however, the most important consideration to keep in mind is how much the student can learn at that given place. At the

same time, it is also important to consider student's individual career goals, reputation of the site, supervisor under whom he/she will be working, connections that the supervisor has, work environment, whether or not there is a possibility of being hired full-time there in the future, whether or not the student will be paid, location, and ability to accommodate the student schedule (Walnut Hill College, n.d.).

5. The value of effective internships experiences: The win-win situation

There is a general acknowledgement that internships in today's market are proverbial "win-win" relationships to all stakeholders involved (e.g. Internships.com, n.d.; Schambach & Dirks, 2002; The Intern Advocate, n.d.; Toncar & Cudmore, 2000).

Table I is indeed to compile and summarize the major possible value and benefits claimed of the work experience in terms of intern students, host organizations and Higher Education institutions.

Table I. Major possible values and benefits claimed of effective internships experiences for selected stakeholders

STAKEHOLDER	MAJOR POSSIBLE VALUES AND BENEFITS CLAIMED OF AN EFFECTIVE INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE
Intern students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Real hands-on/practical experience in an industry of interest. – Integration of theories learned in classroom with real life situations. – Increased community involvement. – Contribution to an organization or company. – Possibility to earn money. – Awareness of the organizational setting and working role models. – More realistic expectations of employment situations. – Appreciation of the types of work involved with their major before they actually enter the job market. -Appreciation that academic success is not the only attribute for successful employment and careers. – Valuable understanding of your major field. – Opportunity to meet and learn from professionals in the field.- Clarification of career interests and prospective career goals. - Clarification of valuable competencies. - Development of professional work habits and attitudes. - Valuable understanding of the demands of the work situation. - Appreciation of the rapidly changing nature of the world of work. - Discovery of gaps between the classroom learning and is needed to know in the real world of work, and the strategies to fill those gaps. ? Increase of knowledge and skills. - Personal development. - Greater degree of personal independence, responsibility, and maturity. - Discovery of strengths and overcoming of weaknesses. - Discovery of how to take criticism. Networking. - More awareness of the importance of soft-skills. – Valuable certification/credentials recognized by industry and academic institutions. - Easier transition from the classroom to the working world. – Increase of the opportunity for a full-time offer at

STAKEHOLDER	MAJOR POSSIBLE VALUES AND BENEFITS CLAIMED OF AN EFFECTIVE INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE
	the host organization. - Increase of the chances of getting a better job either with the present employer or in another organization. - Increase of the marketable job skills that often positively impact employability and starting salary. - Opportunity to select courses and steer the remaining course-work. - Better understanding of course topics by framing the academic concept in terms of analogies and perspectives gained during the real work experience. – Greater readiness to question and critique taught material.
Host organizations	- Demonstration of good corporate citizenship and commitment to the improvement of education and the community. - More awareness of what Higher Education does and the circumstances under it operates. - Minimal cost or relatively inexpensive qualified resources that can be put to good use to work on current projects. - Injection of enthusiasm to the company. - Exposure to new perspectives, practices and ideas that the student intern transfers from his/her university experiences. – Creation of a talent pipeline for future entry-level job openings that need to be filled, reducing the time spent searching for the right candidate.
Higher Education institutions	- More visibility of the university to the community. - Enhancement of the university's overall credibility in the world of work. - Identification of potential areas of common interest which may lead to joint research and development activities with host organizations. - Establishment of an additional route for communication with the industry community that could enables feedback concerning the relevancy and quality of the university's academic programs, and ensure the development and refinement of the different curriculums and syllabus in order to reflect the dynamics of the marketplace and the combination of knowledge and skills that will be expected of graduates in the 'real' world of work. - Faculties with increased familiarity with students, with their true motivations, aspirations, and abilities. Oftentimes, this knowledge gives faculties the opportunity to become more effective participants in the student's education.

Source: own elaboration based on information presented in Bennett et al., 2008; Blackwell et al., 2001; Caribbean Tourism Human Resource Council, 2004; Crebert et al., 2004; Hansen, n.d.; Internships.com, n.d.; Internweb.com, 2011; Lambert, n.d.; Little & Harvey, 2007; Magd & Al Ghazo, 2009; Schambach & Dirks, 2002; St. Lawrence University Career Services, n.d.; Sweet Briar College, n.d.; Sylver Lake College, 2010; The Intern Advocate, n.d; Toncar & Cudmore, 2000.

6. Making the internship an effective and valuable work experience

Making an internship an effective and valuable work experience is not an easy task. In the following, we have highlighted several key elements that are claimed as crucial.

• Long-range planning is the first element we want to stress for an effective and valuable internship experience. As stated by the site Internweb.com (2011), things should be thought in advance (workload and the availability of intern projects, staff support, office space, financial resources, etc.).

• The internship must be in an area closely related to the students major, career goals and to avenues that they are exploring in order to add educational value (Internships.com, n.d.; Magd & Al Ghazo, 2009; Sylver Lake College, 2010).

• The internship experience should be well planned and must include clear expectations, a solid job description, and resources and support to get the job done (St. Lawrence University Career Services, 2010).

• It is imperative that interns are provided with sufficient supervision. In this sense, interns need a supervisor who has enough time to perform this task. Weekly meetings to stay up-to-date with the intern's progress will be needed (Internweb.com, 2011). As stated in the site Internships.com (n.d.), there is nothing more frustrating to interns than feeling forgotten and left hanging around with no one to tell them what to do or to clarify the questions necessary to complete a project. Even in the case the direct supervisor is out or occupied, there should be someone else assigned to the intern, points out the cited source.

• Mentorship should be a vital part of an internship program. It is not enough just to supervise the interns, since most of them are still navigating their way through university and are taking their first step into their chosen field. They need that their supervisor also act as mentors, provide them with enough guiding, support, feedback and help in order to them to learn during the work experience and excel in their role. This person should also build strong relationships with the interns, since he/she can be a huge influence on the future of their career in the industry (The Intern Advocate, n.d.).

• Apart from the supervisor/mentor, a proper and supportive internship management program team in the host organization will also be needed in order to provide a great experience for interns, help them learn more about the host organization and their industry, and prepare them for a future job in their profession (The Intern Advocate, n.d.).

• Interns need also feedback in order to learn and grow during throughout the process. Feedback is the only way interns will know if they are falling short or exceeding expectations (Internships.com, n.d.). This feedback should never be solely focused on things the intern is doing wrong. Positive feedback is often much more beneficial than negative feedback. The critics should be constructive and based on the tasks or projects the intern is completing (The Intern Advocate, n.d.). Apart from that, the same should be coupled with clear direction on how to make improvements (Internships.com, n.d.).

• The provision of some type of compensation is always positive. Even though, many students feel grateful for the opportunity and experience provided by the internship, it is also important to realize that they have to be compensated appropriately for their time. In order to attract talented interns, host organizations need to be competitive in their compensation, the same that could come in many forms other than an hourly wage, which

are also valuable for a student. For instance: A stipend, or lump sum of money, upon completing the internship; performance-based bonuses; tangible elements for a portfolio; transportation and parking expenses; lunches; giving them products or services from the company that they would benefit from; taking interns out to lunch or dinner once their internship is completed, as a way to show that appreciation to their efforts; and/or giving them a going away present (The Intern Advocate, n.d.).

- It is very important that interns be provided with a warm introduction to the host organization. They should be acquainted with their work space and environment, be introduced to their co-workers, become familiar with the organization's communication process and chain of accountability, as well as know the extent of their job authority and decision-making capabilities (Internweb.com, 2011).

- Interns need an appealing environment. As pointed out by the site Internships.com (n.d.), interns, like any other employees, want somewhere comfortable to come to work on both a physical and personal level. On the physical side, they need for instance their workspace, their own chair and desk, easy access to any necessary equipment: computer, printer, phone, fax, etc. Looking at the personal side, they need friendliness and helpfulness, as well as being treated with the same respect as any employee.

- Interns should be included in the host organization activities whenever appropriate. For instance, they should have opportunities to observe and participate with professionals in action (staff meetings, client meetings, presentations) (St. Lawrence University Career Services, 2010). According to the site Internships.com (n.d.), inclusion "exposes them to more situations in which they can observe supervisor behavior and interactions. Moreover, it makes them feel part of the team. In the end, an intern who was treated like an "insider" is much more likely to accept a job offer or to speak favorably about a company to their peers".

- Interns need real and meaningful work assignments. As stressed by the site Internweb.com (2011), gone are the days of using interns as simple "gofers". This is a practice no longer acceptable (The Intern Advocate, n.d.). In this sense, The intern should not be spending most of the time at the internship site doing clerical, secretarial, data-entry, managing and/or menial or mindless tasks (Sylver Lake College, 2010; The Intern Advocate, n.d.). By providing these kinds of task to interns, host organizations are robbing them of the opportunity to develop their knowledge and abilities (Internships.com, n.d.). Rather, interns should be involved in tasks and jobs that utilize their university education (Sylver Lake College, 2010) and that can strengthen their skills in all areas of their field (Intern Advocate, n.d.). Even though interns certainly should not expect to always be working on high priority assignments and tasks, this doesn't mean that they should walk away from the internship work experience empty-handed, so these kinds of menial and other related tasks should not be more than 10% to 20% of the interns' time spent in the experience, points out the last cited source. The Internship Guidebook published by St. Lawrence University Career Services

(2010), is more flexible in this last respect. It states that these kinds of tasks should be less than 50%.

- Finally, it is claimed that if effective and valuable internships experiences are desired, workload for faculties and administrative staff in Higher Education institutions should also be improved. This last statement is in regard with the time these people need for taking care of the all the tasks associated with the organization and management of the internships. For instance, current academic workload models do not provide enough recognition to perform this work. Research and teaching activities are so much appreciated, in the case of faculties. In the case of administrative staff, things are not quite different, and sometimes the amount of time consumed is underestimated (“The challenges of establishing an internship program,” n.d.).

7. Internships’ efficacy under fire: Opening the debate

In chapter 5, we highlighted several of the possible value and benefits of the internship experience claimed by different authors. However, as stated by Harvey et al (1997), it cannot be assumed that internships experiences are beneficial per se, due to the existence of factor that can influence the success or otherwise of the experience.

Auburn (2007), in turn, stresses that the efficacy of the internship experience cannot be taken for granted. Researchers as Bullock et al. (2009), Harvey et al. (1997), and Schambach and Dirks (2002) report that the evidence of such efficacy is **largely anecdotal**. As Schambach and Dirks (2002) remark, even though the benefits proposed seem relevant and realistic, it is not evident that everyone concludes they are real or warrant educational consideration. What is more, Blackwell et al. (2001) the quantitative evidence here is poor, and has not yet covered the impact of different work experience programs on different groups of learners.

In the following, we will open a debate and bring reader’s attention towards three specific issues of the internship efficacy: its effect upon academic performance, the notion of transferability, and the difficulty for evaluating its outcomes.

7.1. The effect of the internship upon academic performance is not clear

As stated by Mansfield (2011), the effect of the internship upon academic performance is not clear. According to the author, the evidence from studies that have analyzed data relating is issue is mixed. He attributes the lack of clarity, in part, to complexities in the analysis of performance effect. Indeed, Duignan (2003), cited in Bullock et al. (2009), underscores that many of the benefits from internships cannot be measured by conventional academic methods.

To date, there has been very little research exploring explicitly the relationship between internships with students’ academic outcomes (Little & Harvey, 2007), and in spite of persistent arguments that suggests that the link weak (Bullock et al., 2009), a growing

body of evidence is supporting that students who have been on internships tend to gain better marks against those who have not (Bullock et al., 2009; Mansfield, 2011).

7.2. The debate about whether or not skills learned in one context can be transferred into another

According to Crebert et al. (2004), “the notion of transferability has been a contentious issue in the literature for a number of years, with most of the debate revolving about whether or not skills learned in one context can be transferred into another” (p. 148). Shepherd (1998) points out that the research literature that support the existence of the transfer effect is extremely equivocal, since this has not been proved yet. The author stresses that many employers frequently state that students develop personal transferable skills (PTSs) from their participation in the internship work experience, but his argument is that “the world of work provides a biased context for the acquisition of PTSs” (p. 139) due to the fact that most mission of commercial organizations (competition in the market-place) are strongly at variance with that found in most institutions of Higher Education (learning for its own sake), and as a result, there is no truly neutral context in which to develop completely the PTSs in the workplace. Shepherd recognizes that non-work-related activities (student-led seminars, group projects, problem-based fieldwork, dissertation preparation, etc.) provide, indeed, more benefits in the field of PTSs than the internship work experience.

Based on his analyses, Shepherd concludes that students cannot longer think that “the workplace automatically provides an environment for learning that cannot be matched elsewhere” and that “the workplace is an essential context for the acquisition of skills that are supposedly, magically and automatically transferable to any other life situation” (p. 143).

7.3. Lack of an accepted model for evaluating the outcomes

The last issue we would like to discuss is that of the lack of an accepted model for evaluating the outcomes. As Auburn (2007) states, the understanding of how outcomes of the internship experience occur is still problematic, even though the existence of two broad models that analyses it as part of the curriculum: The magic ingredient model and the role-transition.

The first model, the “**magic ingredient**” uses the analogy that students are put through the ‘mill’ of Higher Education (HE) and a number of “ingredients” are added into this process, affecting the quality of the product. Internship experiences are supposed to be one of several of these ingredients since it is claimed that the work experience produce employable graduates. The problem here is to determine the way and to what extent internships interact with these other components of the student’s academic program. Studies that have tried to test whether internships are such a magic ingredient by examining the quality of the product in terms of employment or related outcomes, and comparing academic programs which have a internship experience component with their counterparts

which do not, have been limited and have taken little account of the developmental nature of the process of HE. Indeed, the magic ingredient model tends to suggest that any outcomes would depend, in part, upon how well prepared the student was, how appropriate the internship was, or how well debriefed the student was. Furthermore, the model also tends towards a rhetoric of unalloyed goodness relating to the work experience (Auburn, 2007).

The second model, the **“role transition”** considers the internship as a component in a developmental process rather than as an isolated event in the student’s period of study. With this, it emphasizes that the internship experience component should be related to the other components of the broader framework of the student’s career progression and transition to employment. As seen in figure 1, there are several role transitions occurring between the HE setting and the world of work. In this regard, students who undertake the internship work experience need to learn about the role or roles within one setting, and the requirement to adapt or adopt a changed role in the new setting. This learning, specially the one that occurs in the transition back to the HE setting from the world of work in order to finish the academic program, has positive outcomes for the student. Of course, the nature and range of these outcomes will depend in the way the role transitions are managed, both by the student and the members of the HE institutions and host organizations (Auburn, 2007; Auburn et al., 1993).

According to Auburn (2007), the major flaw of both models is that they sustain a mechanistic understanding of the internship experience. The author continues arguing that “neither of these models foregrounds the issue of how those who are the ‘product’ make sense of this experience; that is, how the students themselves construct an understanding of their experience as they take a number of developmental steps through higher education” (pp. 121-122).

The problem is a trivial one. As Auburn (2007) cites, a number of studies shows that students do not perceive a close relationship between the internship experience and their work done at university. Auburn et al. (1993) also cite other studies that have evaluated the outcomes of internships and have not supported the view that one of the main outcomes of internships is the integration of theory and practice. In this same vein, other studies cited by the same source have also suggested that “benefits are more likely to be attributed to an increased exposure to the everyday practicalities of industry and business rather than to a greater ability to relate educational and work experiences” (p. 268).

Concluding comments

Our main conclusions are, first, there is no doubt that an internship is a valuable venture for all parties involved when the experience considers not only its main purpose and desired outcomes, but also the needs of those that participate in it. Participating in such experience does represent an investment (time, resources and/or cash) for all stakeholders,

and they should have some significant gains at the end to get the most out of this investment, otherwise it will be deemed a letdown. Partnership and collaboration between all involved seems to be here as crucial to make the experience not only feasible, but also valuable and worth of being considered as the necessary link between Higher Education and the world of work.

Second, in today's job market, the right internship can be the key to a great job (USM, 2010, p. 5) due to the experience is repeatedly related to higher graduate employment rates and possibly to higher subsequent incomes (Blackwell et al., 2001). However, intern students should be cautious about what internships within all out there, are well-suited to their aspirations, since the experience is also an essential part of figuring out and furthering their career goals and prospects. The selecting process can be tricky without the right resources (Internships.com, n.d.).

Third, even though the literature on the topic emphasizes that "each internship should provide a positive learning experience that will help the student move into the world of work" (Sylver Lake College, 2010, p. 5), learning "the secrets of the trade" (Caribbean Tourism Human Resource Council, 2004, p.14), there are students that report they did not learn anything (The Intern Advocate, n.d.). According to the last source, this shows a stark reality: Many internship programs are plagued with problems that apart from making the experience unfulfilling, leave a bad taste in the intern's mouth and deter others from applying in the future. The source reports that the problems range from not planning correctly to sometimes leaving the intern student in the dark, without taking proactive measures to ensure that meaningful and positive experience. We now understand better that intern students undertake this "hands-on" learning experience not only with the aim of meeting the requirements of their academic program and build their resume with an impressive internship listing, but also for working side-by-side with seasoned professionals in meaningful work assignments that could help them in the process of learning new skills and abilities, change attitudes, live new experiences and increase confidence and self-awareness (Caribbean Tourism Human Resource Council, 2004).

Fourth, we discovered again and again that the learning component is primary in the internship experience. It must be stated, however, that "creating the optimum learning environment for internships can be difficult and complex, as, unlike the classroom, in the workplace the student is not necessarily the central concern, and the learning experiences are often unique and unpredictable" (Billet: cited in "The challenges of establishing an internship program," n.d., p. 6). This is a difficult, but one that cannot be refused. In this sense, the internship learning program should not be rigid (Flinders University: cited in "The challenges of establishing an internship program," n.d., p. 6) and employers need to understand the educational expectations of the intern student. Higher Education institution plays critical part in this process ("The challenges of establishing an internship program," n.d., p. 6).

Fifth, in these uneven and tough economic times, characterized by the recession, internships are becoming increasingly valuable to employers who now are frequently viewing the experience as a method for accessing free or inexpensive labor that can generate value and substance for them in order to stay alive long enough (Internships.com, n.d.). We strongly believe that this new mindset could be dangerous to the above mentioned primary component, since the new main goal to be assumed for intern students in that workplace will be contributing not learning, as also reports the last cited source. Once again, we make a call to all stakeholders involved in the internship experience to review this and other issues that could threaten and do harm to the main focus of the experience.

Sixth, even though we acknowledge that no one can put a price for the internship valuable experience, we took this opportunity to recommend that some type of compensation should be included in the internship proposal, since this aspect is positive from the point of view of students, much of them feel also the recession and cannot afford to work for free, no matter how much they might be motivated and interested. At the end, both host organization and students will be benefited.

Last but not least, we would like to stress that the research studies on the topic are far from being definitive and the evidence of its efficacy itself is very weak. Of course, there are many studies and reports that are geared toward the 'good news story' of internships (Duignan: cited in Auburn, 2007). As Auburn (2007) argues, much of these tend to downplay any negative experiences associated with internships, assuming design problems, in order to not changing the general assumption that internships produce beneficial outcomes. However, the true is that more research studies with a broader view are needed. Auburn suggests that the issue of the developmental stages leading to the eventual graduate status of the student must be one of the topics to be addressed. We, in turn, suggest more research oriented to determine to what extent and under which conditions are combinations of learning at Higher Education institutions and at work more successful than tertiary-based education alone, in providing students the skills and knowledge they need in order to find employment and engage in satisfying careers.

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