

PARTICIPATES' REFLECTION ON INTERNSHIP PROGRAM BARRIERS IN ESTONIAN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract:

Scientific articles reflect a lot about different forms of university and industry collaborations. Mostly they talk about knowledge transfer and innovation. However, it is also important to pay attention to the inhibiting factors of accepting interns and on the other side examine difficulties that students have in finding internship placement as well as understand internship supervisors' views on the issue. For students internship is a good opportunity to learn job related skills and not necessarily get involved with the company in the future. This article reviews internship program barriers from three perspectives: interns and university supervisors from five Estonian universities and site supervisors from various companies. This study investigates an intern as someone who is in training, who may be paid, but who is a temporary employee (Tovey, 2001); internship as a supplement or complement to academic instruction in environmental science. The data from site supervisors and interns were collected through a web-based questionnaire and universities supervisors were interviewed. Survey was carried out during 2012-2014. The sample consists of 418 interns, 194 institutions providing internship and 24 internship supervisors from universities. The study gives an overview of the situation of internship in Estonia. The data have been discussed in the context of the related literature. Increasing the quality of internship in enterprises in Estonia involves various stakeholders. The author of the present study finds that change can be achieved by coordinated cooperation between stakeholders. In course of cooperation, the best cooperation models and communication meeting mutually agreed aims can be developed.

Keywords:

barriers, intern, internship program, reflection, site supervisor, university supervisor

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1 Theoretical framework

Articles in academic journals reflect a lot about different forms of university and industry collaborations. Mostly they talk about knowledge transfer and innovation, but important aspects are internship barriers and motivators among students and site supervisors, too.

Accordingly, more and more interactions between university and industry are becoming subject to measurement and management, leading to more formal, contractual exchanges based on codified rules and regulations. Given the central importance by policy to building and supporting university-industry links, the lack of research on the obstacles to collaboration is a serious hindrance to the design of effective policy (Bruneel et al., 2010). University-industry links help firms to increase awareness of opportunities for commercial exploitation of publicly funded research, and facilitate the transmission of knowledge between academic and industrial scientists, thus contributing to strengthen a country's innovative performance (D'Este, 2008).

Fox (2001) likewise, Mihail (2006) considered internship as an opportunity to close the gap between theory and practical reality. Cheng et al. (2004) brought out that internship programs provide students with needed tools and educate them to take responsibility in their future work life and industry professionals think that students who have internship experiences are more marketable. In analysing university internships, the general assumption is that the modern knowledge economy requires a leap in graduates' skills and educational institutions try to implement innovative reforms to provide their students with skills needed by "high performance" firms. (Mihail, 2006) Internships form a vital part of any student's education, giving the student a chance to hone his or her skills, interaction with more experienced professionals, and practice in different areas of the field (Beebe et al., 2009).

Supervision by industry professionals could help students learn also from mistakes, learning through networking, learning from the unsystematic process of trial and error, or learning from a series of interpersonal experiences (Marsick, Watkins, 2001). In addition, the programs should provide students with needed skills, and educate them to take responsibility in future work life, thus bridging the gap (Collins, 2002). Establishing good training programs for interns, giving interns meaningful tasks, and empowering them to manage the tasks in a more creative way could be solutions to improve future internship programs (Cheng et al., 2004).

In terms of internship the author of the article shares the views of Abrudan et al. (2012: 987-988): "Internship participants can learn from inside how a company works, what does the position they have in view imply, they can find out the latest news in the field and can acquire knowledge and practical experience useful in the future. Internship program helps the youth, especially students eager to gain experience through practical work in a job within a company or institution chosen, giving the opportunity to translate theoretical

knowledge into practice and to develop skills and experience activities on labour market that awaits. Reasons for which internship is the best choice in gaining work experience during college in the environment and on the job you desire are:

- to put into practice the knowledge acquired in theory,
- to see what the job in the studied field involves,
- to gain experience,
- to know how to approach problems in that area,
- to learn from professionals,
- to assess the level of their professional training,
- to see if their choice is according to their career plan,
- to learn new things, for self-assessment, for new career opportunities,
- to have an inside perspective of the field,
- to be made aware of future trends field,
- to be familiar with company policies, for professional skills development.”

2 Methodology

2.1 Participants

Participants were from three groups: students as interns, site supervisors from various companies and universities supervisors. Students that participated in the survey were from five Estonian universities (see table 1). All 418 students/interns responded to the survey, participated in full-time study. All the participated students had been interns within two years.

Table 1. The number of interns' in web-based survey by levels of education and universities

University	Level of education			Total, %
	Bachelor's	Master's	Other	
University of Tartu (UT)	82	78	39	47
University of Tallinn (UTLN)	33	36	5	18
Tallinn University of Technology (TUT)	32	27	9	16
Estonian University of Life Sciences (EULS)	25	32	8	16
Estonian Business School (EBS)	11	1	0	3
Total, No	183	174	61	
Total, %	43	42	15	100

Companies and site supervisors were found through the universities supervisors contacts with companies. 194 site supervisors responded to the survey. 24 universities

supervisors interviewed in the survey were from the same five Estonian universities as students (see table 2).

Table 2. The number of site supervisors' in web-based survey and universities supervisors'

Companies site supervisors						Universities supervisors		
Size of the company	No	%	Supervisor position	No	%	University	No	%
more than 250 workers	65	34	employees or civil servants	68	35	UT	8	33
50-249 workers	60	31	middle managers	47	24	TUT	6	25
10-49 workers	48	25	senior specialists	46	24	EULS	5	21
less than 10 workers	21	10	owner/senior manager/ executive worker	33	17	UTLN	4	17
Total	194	100		194	100		24	100

2.2 Methods

Therefore the data from site supervisors and interns were collected through two web-based questionnaires. Basis for the questionnaires were topics and keywords from the field of theoretical literature about internship and university and industry collaboration. The aim was to find previous studies that help to create informative questions.

The questionnaire consisted of three parts: the first part consists of general questions about assessments, attitudes, and process; the second part deals with the experience of intern; third part contains of specifying questions about site supervisor, company, or intern. Test items in questionnaire were similar in both groups because one aim was to compare those results. Site supervisors' questionnaire consisted of 27 questions and interns' questionnaire of 26 questions. Respondents had to answer to some questions on Likert 5-point scale, where five meant total agreement and one total un-agreement. In case of some questions was opportunity to choose between several answer options. In the end of the questionnaire was an opportunity to comment and give proposals in the field of internship programs.

Interview plan for internship university supervisors was compiled on the ground of results gained from the study questionnaire conducted among interns and internship site supervisors. Interview plan consisted of questions on the following issues: general attitudes towards internship, internship process and roles, giving and receiving feedback and scope of cooperation during internship. In order to get both: qualitative and quantitative data about the research issue semi-structured interview with 12 open-ended questions, including questions with multiple-choice answers was used. At the end of the interview, the interviewee was offered an opportunity to share his/her views on internship and give suggestions for change.

2.3 Data collection and analysis

The pilot study was conducted during the period of 01-10 March 2013. The aim of this preliminary analysis was to test comprehensiveness and relativity of questionnaire. The students/interns and site supervisors questionnaires were web-based in Google docs and data collected during the period of 18 March-30 April 2013.

Author analyses universities and faculties' homepages and selected programs that differ enough. Assumption was that programs have to be full time. E-mails were sent to universities supervisors and in some cases for the head of the faculty. Universities supervisors were asked to send those letters to interns and to companies they have connections through internship. Universities supervisors were asked to share their contacts with companies to get in contact with the site supervisors. Through homepages and different hints, researchers also wrote to some random companies that offer internships. Prerequisite was that company have participated in internship process during last two years (2011-2013) because earlier thing are hard to remember.

Interviews with universities supervisors were conducted 10.2013-01.2014. As total, face-to face interviews were conducted with 13 university supervisors and 11 e-mail responses were received (see table 2). Average length of interview was 30 minutes; the longest interview lasted 75 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The text was coded based on research questions designed earlier.

Whilst the analysis of data was performed in SPSS 18.0, MS Excel 2013 and NVivo, the current article focuses on the issues related to internship barriers only.

3 Findings

Both site and universities supervisors ranked busy time schedules to be the strongest hindering factor. This can be explained by micro and small businesses work operations and lack of people who could devote extra time on guidance and supervision of interns.

Table 3. Internship coordinators and students understandings on hindering factors of going to internship

Hindering factors	Companies site supervisors	Internship coordinators
this job is often not paid	1/5	1/2
interns were often not having any goals for the internship	1/8	1/2
university curricula are not linked with practice	1/8	
interns were often not having any goals for the internship	1/8	1/8
interns' lack of working skills	1/8	1/8

Note: Table presents ratio of respondents who provided keyword related to relevant category.

The fact that this job is often not paid was also considered as hindering factor by site and universities supervisors. Site supervisors brought also forward that interns were often not having any goals for the internship:

It is quite natural that intern is not able to express clearly what kind of job or work operations they would like to learn but some goals or vision should be still set.

Another aspect criticized by site supervisors was that universities curricula are not linked with practice. The same idea was also expressed by several universities supervisors:

If something could be made better then internship should be like normal studies outcome. Currently student goes to do internship and when back at university we need to explain how to relate experience gained from practice with academic knowledge.

Many site supervisors expressed their dissatisfaction with interns' lack of working skills but more importantly they referred to interns not asking relevant questions. One site supervisor expressed fear for internal information leakage:

Because of job tasks and information leakage possibility, it is difficult for a small company to accept interns. Secondly, cost of lab instruments is very high and therefore we have not provided internship placement in the lab. Chances for mistakes are too big, materials and equipment is expensive. Each second and sent is important in terms of efficiency in small sized private company.

The same idea was expressed also by one university supervisor. Site supervisors who ranked lack of intern's skills as major inhibiting factor ranked intern's teamwork and learning skills also lower.

Results of the study indicate that site supervisors expect intern to learn practical skills quickly in course of work tasks. Also, it was found that when site supervisor is not satisfied with university supervisor he/she gave lower scores for students' internship objectives. Thus it can be said that interns with clearly set objectives are more likely to come from universities where internship supervisors have closer contacts with students.

In regard to internship length some site supervisors made following suggestions:

Internship could last longer (for example 2 months) and during or after Master level studies, because by that time students have more specific and general knowledge, also elementary knowledge on hygiene and equipment.

Students are more concerned about the fact that internship companies are not near their home, thus they have difficulties in finding accommodation and secondly they are not offered interesting and specialty related job tasks and that curricula with subjects learned is different from practice.

Table 4. Interns' and universities supervisors' understandings on hindering factors of going to internship

Hindering factors	Interns	Universities supervisors
internship companies are not near interns home	1/5	1/2
interns are not offered interesting and specialty related job tasks	1/8	1/2
university curricula are not linked with practice	1/7	1/7
internship is not paid for the job	1/6	1/3
finding an internship placement is an essential obstacle	1/10	1/4

Note: Table presents ratio of respondents who provided keyword related to relevant category

It is quite common that internship is not paid for the job but the accommodation and relevant cost seem to be serious obstacle in the view of students and universities supervisors. In addition, several universities supervisors found that when student takes internship in some other location they would need some support:

Their life experience is often related to a single village/city where they have born and raised up. For example, they feel uneasy in places they have never been. Moreover, they do not want to go on the reason that they have no money and accommodation, and in this case, I cannot tell that you must go there.

Certainly, the location of internship is very important. For example, we have always found opportunities so that interns do not have to search for accommodation, we take care of it.

Another obstacle mentioned in the literature is the fact that interns perceive that they are not offered jobs related to their specialization and employers do not regard internship as important part of their activities. The latter was also a concern of some universities supervisors'. Interns' views are illustrated by the following except from interview:

Theories acquired at school are just a dry text on paper and unfortunately it does not often help to understand real-life situations. Practice and theories tend to be separate from each other. Moreover, study materials are often out of date.

A need to link theories and practice was also expressed by universities supervisors. Both, interns (mostly Master degree level) and 1/3 of the universities supervisors brought forward that finding an internship placement is an essential obstacle. The following excerpt from the interview with interns illustrates the situation:

I was not satisfied with the fact that it was difficult to find internship placement. A company was not interested in interns and I perceived it was an extra obligation to them.

Universities supervisors stressed that students had often issues with internship length. For example according to coordinator:

We have heard students telling us that they were told as if the ministry will stop working when they leave for 3 weeks.

However, survey results with interns brought forward that internship could be even longer. Universities supervisors found that one hindering factor is also students' lack of interest towards internship.

4 Discussion

Company's readiness to accept interns depends on information gained and particular agreements (Vahtramäe et al. 2011: 15). The same ideas like in Reiska (2014: 177) came also up in the current study results: "Scarcity of financial resources is a source of problems in cooperation. It creates difficulties in time sharing and contribution in the situation where number of human resource meets the efficiency requirement but maintenance of partnership and relevant communication is considered not enough motivating extra job." Busy time schedules and lack of people who could devote extra time on guidance and supervision of interns are also brought forward by Maertz Jr et al. (2014: 129).

Sometimes fulfilment of internship objectives and acquiring relevant learning outcomes may take longer, but in this case internship length in curricula is a restriction. There are different reasons for longer time necessity, related to learner (slow learner, gaps in study process, psychological issues, etc.), supervisor (scarce teaching experience, fatigue, workload, motivation issues, etc.), educational institution (unclear learning objectives, little experience with companies) or internship company (not enough operations, lack of extra resources that allow involving interns, low motivation, etc.). Therefore one should already at the beginning of internship consider the fact that time is restricted resource and dedicate to obtaining learning objectives from the first minutes. (Vahtramäe et al. 2011: 43)

Obtaining internship-learning objectives were considered important also by Dall'Alba and Sandberg (2006) and Tynjälä et al. (2003). Universities have to pay more attention to linking theory and practice in their learning process and find ways how to merge internship more successfully into their curricula. Additionally internship content and its administration should be analysed and conclusions made because of what quality of education is to increase and students need to find employment in order to get job experience when studying is to decrease. (Mägi et al. 2011: 22)

Several studies have found that interns are concerned with being not taken seriously when they ask too many questions. Many site supervisors are frustrated not only by a gap in current skills (e.g., writing, technology, etc.) but also by many new employees'

reticence to ask questions; specifically, many industry insiders perceive that their new employees seem “worried about asking too many questions” and are consequently characterized as being “not especially assertive with authority figures” (see also Bosley, 1995 as cited in Sapp, Zhang 2009: 276). Surely not all job skills can be obtained at higher educational institutions, since there are many skills and specific expertise that can be gained from working during particular time at particular job and work environment only. On the other hand, higher educational institution should provide prerequisite conditions such as 1) ability to apply theory into practice in different situations, 2) ability to generalize obtained knowledge in different situations, 3) conscious development and application of transferable skills. (Rutiku et al. 2013: 6)

Because interns have a temporary status and very little work experience, some entrepreneurs may be unwilling to coach interns or effectively involve interns in their core businesses. Entrepreneurs may deny interns access to certain facilities (e.g., computers and databases) or social events with clients, or discourage their participation in certain work activities (e.g., business meetings). Interns can be assigned chores of trivial value such as making copies and running errands, and sometimes they are completely ignored and left idling. (Green 1997, as cited in Zhao 2013: 445) Barriers to success are created if students perceive that they are not engaged in meaningful work (the “intern making photocopies” syndrome), employers do not consider the internship a serious part of the business, and faculty does not view internships as part of the educational program (Thiel, Hartley 1997) due to a lack of rigour and academic content (the “why should they get academic credit for this” syndrome).

With such apparent shifts, it is no surprise that interns do not always know what they are signing up for, or that we can be tricked with promises that turn out to be less than gold. Of course I would have been naive to expect that unpaid work would be a dream job. (Figiel 2013: 38) Importance of giving major related job tasks to intern has been emphasized in several earlier studies (Ryan, Krapels 1997; Tovey 2001; Rothman 2007; Figiel 2013: 39). A need to create a link between theoretical knowledge and practice during internship was brought forward also Mihail (2006: 34).

5 Conclusion

The results of the current study match with Reiska (2014: 181): “Employers find coordination of internship to be problematic in terms of offering placement. They tell that they do not mind accepting interns when the internship administration considers company’s operations seasonality – it would be important to know when and how many interns can be expected and what level of prior knowledge or experience they have.” In addition, the study of Gibson-Sweet (2010: 937) found that learning at work environment means development of practical skills.

In conclusion:

- The study gives an overview of the state of internship in Estonia.
- Change can be achieved by coordinated cooperation between stakeholders.
- Increasing financial resources.
- In course of cooperation, the best cooperation models and communication meeting mutually agreed aims must be developed.

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