

TO PRACTICE OR NOT TO PRACTICE? DESIGNING HIGHER EDUCATION CURRICULUM TO BOOST EMPLOYABILITY

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Abstract

One important dimension of Higher education curriculum design pertains to the inclusion of internships in study programmes. These have been generally conceptualized as learning experiences capable of bridging theoretical knowledge and hands-on experiences. The underlying pedagogical relevance is based on the premise that internships create the possibility of contextualized learning, fostering both professional growth and students' self-esteem and pro-activity (Little, 2006). Interns are provided with the opportunity of early networking, as they enrol in practical activities and professionally interact with other people, besides their academic teachers and their graduate colleagues (Alpert, Heaney, & Kuhn, 2009; Weible, 2009).

Research concerning internships has extensively reported the overwhelming positive effect of internships. Nevertheless, a more recent trend in literature has argued that little has been said concerning the relationship between internships and graduate employment or employability. Wilton (2012), for example, argues that more needs to be understood about the characteristics and specificities of internships and the extent to which such characteristics are capable of overcoming the current concern over the increase of graduates' unemployment rates.

Research conducted on the Portuguese case based on a database of 1,168 study programmes of first cycle degrees sought to redress this gap. Besides demonstrating that study programmes which include internships (cooperative education) tend to generate lower levels of unemployment than those that do not include internships, this research has suggested that the nature and structure of internships significantly impacts on graduate unemployment rates. In specific, mandatory internships tend to outperform their optional counterpart in reducing graduate unemployment levels. Moreover, thin sandwich courses also seem to be more beneficial than thick sandwich courses, suggesting that expanding and diversifying internships throughout the curriculum can reduce graduate unemployment rates. These results strongly suggest that it is not (only) the internship learning experience per se that makes the difference considering graduate employability, but (also) the way those internship experiences are organized along the study programme.

This poster is, thus, focused on the nature and structure of internships, assessing their implications for higher education curriculum design. It does so by exploring the perspectives of the main stakeholders involved in internships regarding their motivations; required efforts; and expected outcomes.

Empirically, the poster is based on the content analysis of semi-structured individual interviews to units coordinators and also focus groups conducted with coordinators of study programmes; internship supervisors (both academics and employers); and also interns. Qualitative analysis has been sustained by the main learning models traditionally used in research on work-based learning and aims at identifying a set of principles related with internships design, and modes of embedding them along an entire course, which may contribute to the development of graduates' employability.

Reported findings may constitute an important primer for reflection on the design of pedagogical strategies that maximize the contextual learning outputs of internships in a more systematic way, being particularly relevant for leading academics, namely those involved in curriculum design.