



## Webinar: Enhancing the quality of internships

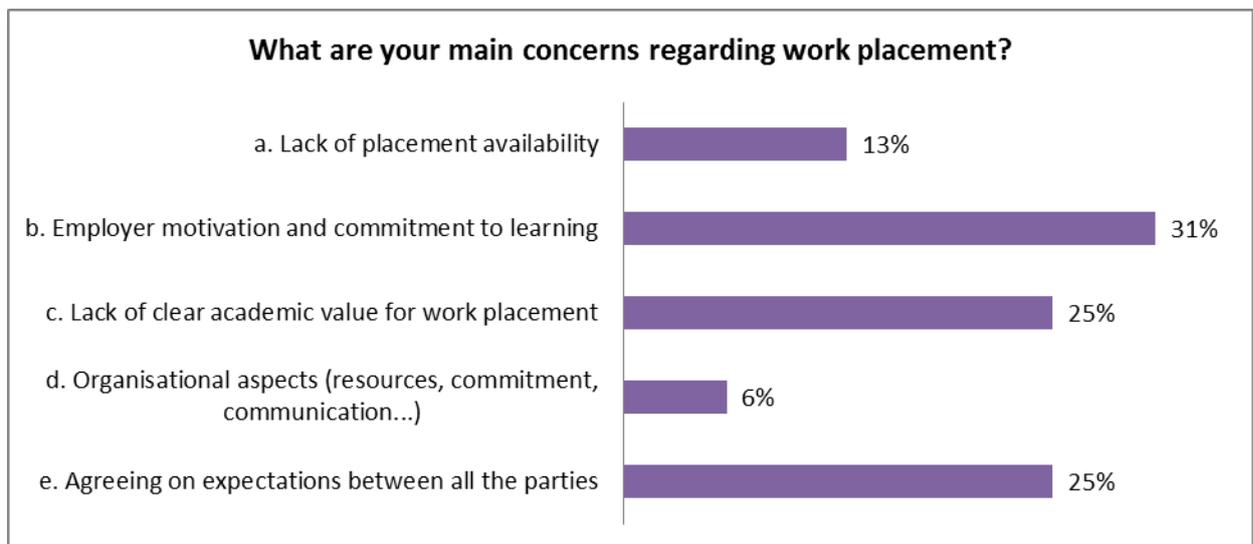
2 July 2013, 16h00 Paris (France) time

### Highlights

“Internships and apprenticeships are meant to provide young people with the opportunity to gain work experience or use formally acquired skills in a practical setting. They should have educational value and add to the competencies of the intern or apprentice.” European Youth Forum

Workplace learning is not new; however, internships have become more widespread with the economic downturn and increased employer requirements for work experience. As a result of high demand, it can be difficult to secure quality internships for all students.

A webinar on “Enhancing the quality of internships”, held on 2 July 2013, brought together practitioners from higher education institutions, youth and student associations, as well as business representatives from over 15 countries, to explore the key factors for successful internship programmes and consider what steps higher education institutions can take to enhance their quality. The following pages present some of the key highlights and participants’ responses to the instant polls<sup>1</sup>.



<sup>1</sup> For technical reasons, some participants were not able to participate in the polls.

### **Question 1: What kinds of internships/work placements are most effective?**

- What is the appropriate length of time?
- When is the best timing?
- In what circumstances would part-time work placements be better than full-time ones?
- How do internships compare with part-time or summer on-campus employment?
- Do several work-placements with different employers give students/graduates significantly better options in terms of employability?
- Are different types of placements more appropriate for students at different levels (e.g. Bachelor's, Master's etc)?
- What are relevant alternatives to internships for developing work-relevant skills?-

### **Highlights of the discussion:**

Several participants highlighted the gap between internship theory and reality. This can be explained by, among other things, a lack of mutual understanding of expectations. One participant stressed the difference that existed between apprenticeships and internships, stating that apprenticeships were better controlled and could take place over longer time periods.

Some universities have developed internship programmes that work well and achieve high conversion to jobs.

One particular example was presented where the internship is part of a global process of relations between the university and the business world at regional and international levels. Employees of the university, from student support, to academic staff, to management, adhere to the goal of preparing students for employment during their studies.

This approach shows a good success rate, with 85% of internships translating into jobs with the same employer. Based on this experience, the university learned the following lessons:

- Internships are designed differently depending on the level of study.
- For graduates, the Internship has a duration of at least 6 months to allow the student to fit into the company. This gives the necessary time for the company to organise itself and for the transfer of a number of fundamentals to the students.
- For lower levels of study, the Internship takes place between the 2nd and 3rd year and has a duration of 4 weeks.

### **Question 2: How can internships/work placements be managed effectively?**

- Who is responsible for managing work placements in your institution?
- Do you have an institution-wide framework for managing internships across disciplines?
- Is work placement part of a global student employability strategy?
- What contract arrangements apply between students, employers and your institution?
- What is your policy on financial compensation for work placements?
- How do you deal with equity issues linked with an unpaid work placement?
- Should credits be awarded for workplace training? If yes, what level of credits, how many, and under what conditions?

## Highlights of the discussion:

The discussion showed that this question is challenging and difficult for many universities.

The success of the process depends on its organisation. The university plays a central role; however, the models that work vary from one institution to another.

In some universities, it is entirely up to the student to research and identify an internship; in others, research and identification are shared between students, staff and teachers. Some institutions group the contract management, in others it is a decentralised task. Finally, some universities offer a stipend to help students during their internships abroad, while for some trades the internships are paid for by the company.

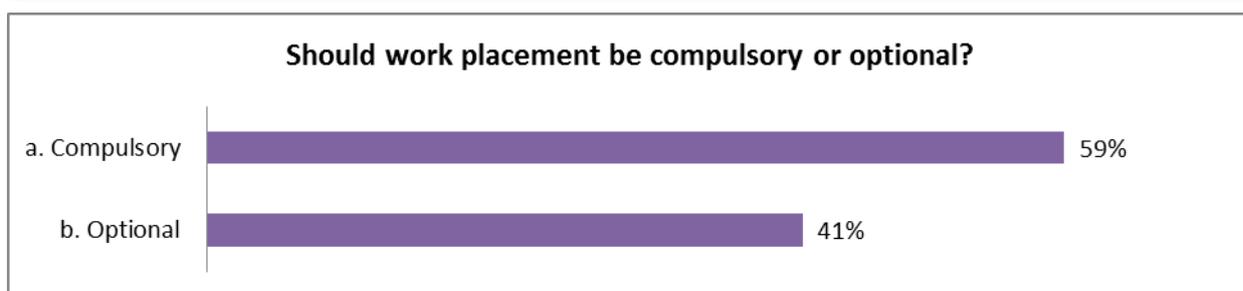
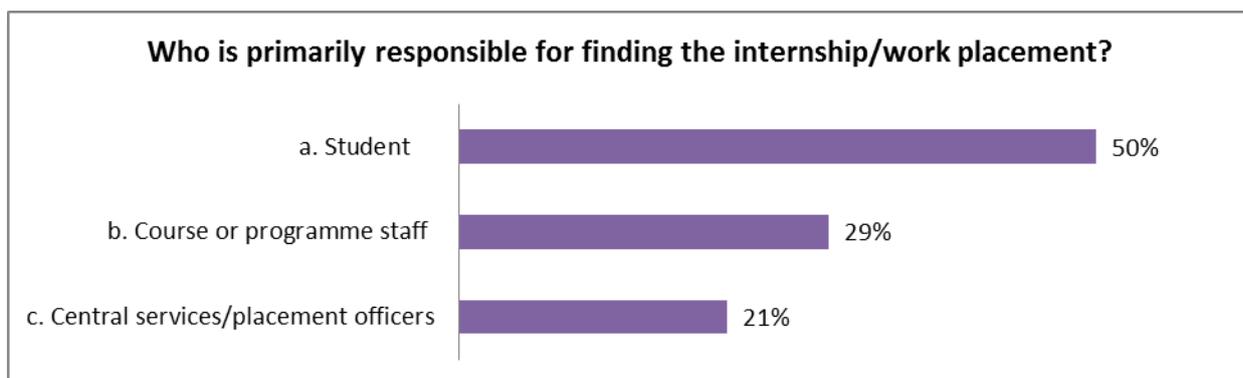
Among common practices that seem promising for success we see:

- a sense of collective responsibility within the institution to improve the employability of students;
- the establishment of permanent structures within the institution (or linked with the institutions) that manage relationships with businesses;
- a career-based approach, with monitoring of students that goes beyond internships and special attention to the quality of training; student monitoring up to and beyond graduation;
- a point of contact for the company within the university.

One participant explained in more detail some elements of the success of their programme:

- Everybody works collaboratively and academics are involved.
- The people in charge of the internships are part of a larger team on “employer engagement and development”.
- They work with companies to identify the level and the type of internships.
- They then advertise the internships in the institution.

On the issue of whether internships should be compulsory or optional: we need to keep in mind that there are different ways and approaches by which students can get exposure to work environments in addition to internships, e.g. through projects connected to local businesses. The important point is for students to get good exposure to the challenges of the workplace.



### Question 3: Preparation and feedback: How do you communicate with students before, during and after work placements?

- How do you provide information/advice to students about employment trends/careers?
- How do you define the skills that need to be acquired during the work placement?
- Do you monitor the student during the workplace experience?
- How do you assess the work placement?
- What feedback do you expect from the employer on the student's performance?
- How do you give clear and precise feedback to students on the success of the work placement?
- What do you do if the student did not acquire the skills expected?

### Highlights of the discussion:

The participants agreed that what really matters is the quality of the experience as this has a strong impact on employability. One participant referred to the European Quality Charter on Internships and Apprenticeships.

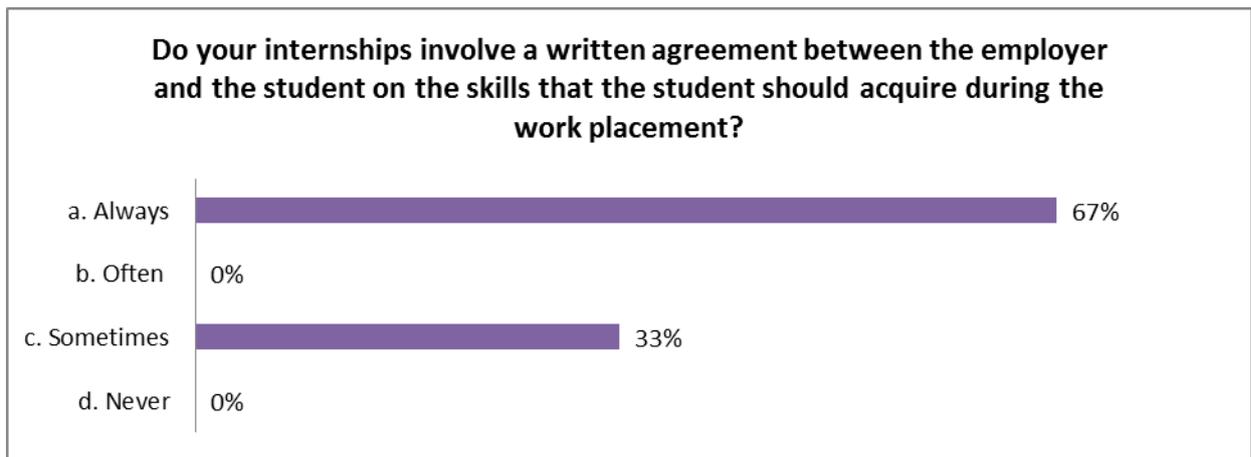
Some participants highlighted the distinction between a vocational degree targeting a particular career and a more general academic degree. It is easier to link curriculum with internship work experience in fields where there are clear linkages, e.g. nursing, and harder for other fields, e.g. history or literature.

To enhance the quality of internships as a learning experience, the following are some of the ideas provided:

- The learning content should be agreed between the 3 stakeholders (student, institution and employer).
- As it is a shared responsibility, there should be a fair distribution of responsibilities and duties.
- The stakeholders should be responsible for their input.
- The role of the supervisor in the company is key.

A participant shared a successful experience on how to effectively agree on what the learning outcomes should be: for the institution, the quality question starts at the beginning of the curriculum, as employability is embedded in every degree programme. The objective is to produce well rounded students with work skills. When the time comes for the internship, the students are ready for work, having already acquired skills to back up their candidacy. To achieve this result, all parties concerned are involved in the process. Some concrete examples of actions taken are:

- Helping students recognise the skills they have acquired. Everyone can get a degree, but the best candidates have worked and they have something to share.
- University employees joining the candidate recruitment panels of companies.
- Ensuring academic buy-in with clear messages from the top management.
- Involving companies in the university throughout the year (by giving lectures, running live projects, etc.). This also helps to give a dynamic dimension to the diplomas and helps academics keep up with change.
- Checking if students are happy and learning.



In order to get everyone on board, such actions are included in the institutional culture. The university is a community doing its best to generate jobs for the region. The following elements have become key assets in this endeavour:

- They have a good manager who is 100% behind the drive for employability.
- They created an umbrella brand for mentoring/career service.
- They are trying to always think ahead and be innovative.

This institution has a high success rate as they work upstream on the types of skills companies are looking for. They manage the expectations; if all is done well at the planning stage success often follows. The process is clearly defined and the university accompanies the company and the student throughout the whole experience. For example, if students don't have a successful interview, they will receive feedback in order to improve for the next interview.

Altogether, it is a very intensive, but valuable process that supports the regeneration of the city and the region.

#### **Question 4: How to create effective relationships with employers?**

- Do you create a range of partnerships with companies (e.g. local employers, large companies, etc.)?
- Do you seek to build relationships with employer representative groups (e.g. Chambers of Commerce) or local/regional development programmes?
- Do you have a set of criteria that each company offering internships must meet (e.g. dedicated staff in the company for training)?
- Do you agree with the company in advance on which skills are to be acquired and how?
- How is feedback from employers used by the institution and the course/programme directors (e.g. impact on work placement programme, influence on curriculum, acquisition of equipment for training, etc.)?

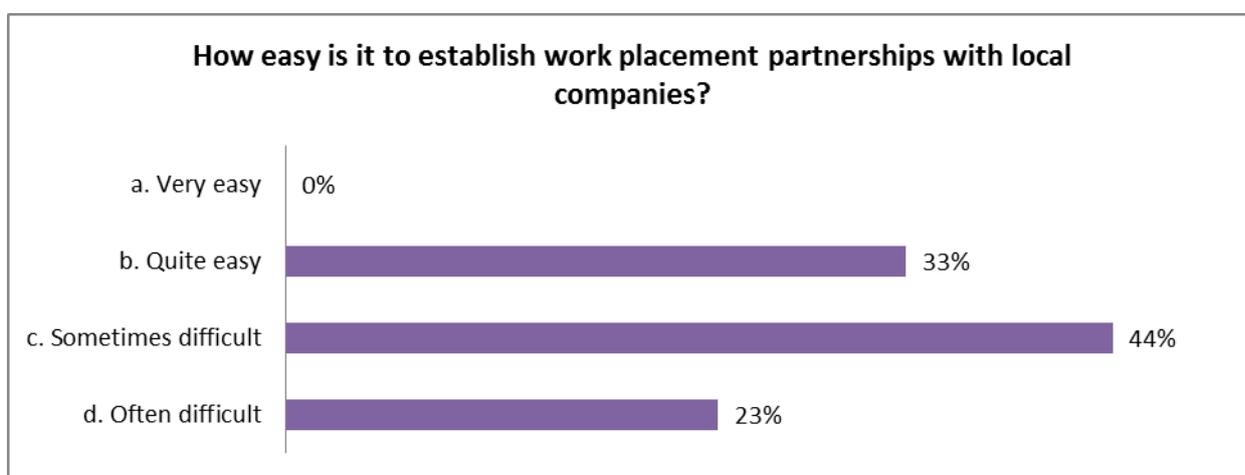
#### **Highlights of the discussion:**

While many institutions do not have an institution-wide approach, the discussion surrounding issues such as student fees and employability are increasing the pressure. It is difficult to find the right balance, as a university is not an employment agency but a place of education.

Many participants highlighted the fact that it is difficult and time consuming to build trust with employers. Some even mentioned that it is hard to really assess the institution's efficiency; even when things seem to be going well, it may be difficult for a company to be in contact with the university.

Many businesses, particularly small businesses, do not know how to recruit young graduates. The legal requirements can make working with a big university intimidating for SMEs.

The issue of trust is also valid for students. It takes time for a student to trust the university and the employer. Graduates also have to understand that they need to learn and that they will have to climb the professional ladder step by step. To build this qualitative relationship, some participants indicated that they spent a lot of time talking with students, families and student unions. To generate trust, word of mouth is a significant element of success.



**Thank you for your interest. We hope to have the opportunity to meet you at a forthcoming conference!**

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