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The ISI Florence & Umbra Institute
Studies in International Education

n.2

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Angelo Pontecorboli Editore - Firenze
E-mail: info@pontecorboli.it
www.pontecorboli.com
ISBN 978-88-3384-036-9



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Printed in Italy, June 2019

A Fresh Perspective on Internships Abroad in Italy

Thomas Brownlees

1. New trends in international education

One of the most prominent trends in international education over the last decade pertains to the relentless transition from in-class lectures to new and more informal approaches to college education in both humanities and STEM disciplines (Stanford et al., 2018). Furthermore, some of the most innovative teaching methodologies have found very fertile grounds in the context of international education, where the chance to merge “traditional” in-class lectures with an immersion into a country’s cultural heritage has sparked a wide range of new opportunities for students. Credit-bearing courses now include volunteering, practicums, service learning and experiential learning courses, just to name a few.

Because of this trend, universities worldwide have been able to not only revamp their courses, but also develop a more profound engagement with the communities where they operate. Volunteering is an inspiring example of how, for instance, the US culture of service could develop, through study abroad programs, an international reach for the benefit and growth of all parties involved. These typologies of courses promote a learning-by-doing approach, centered on the hard and soft skills that students can develop when immersed into a collaborative environment. As the formal US educational system can be perceived as more inclined towards competitive behaviors, these experiences can make a difference in the students’ lives by promoting team values and communal goals.

Within the context of informal learning, internships have obtained particular prominence in universities’ degree curricula, as they not only serve as a preliminary step before entering the workforce but also provide an irreplaceable career-orienting experience. Each university in this

respect may have a different definition of what can be defined as an internship, as it may be described both as simple exposure to a professional environment, or as actual labor, where a student's performance may be assessed on the same framework as regular employees. Thanks to the development of international relations, however, interning at home may not be enough for the most driven students. Globalization requires graduates to have a high cultural intelligence quotient (Earley et al., 2004) if they are to enter multinational companies. Study abroad organizations in this respect face a challenging task, that of delivering these opportunities by matching diverse and complex local business landscapes with students' expectations, which at times are hard to match. However, those study abroad organizations that have been able to meet this responsibility have seen internship requests increase steadily, while growing their local business network. There are, nevertheless, many elements to consider as the model usually adopted for internship provision is still less than perfect. In the following section, we will analyze the cost-benefit relationship which these experiences entail.

2. The opportunities and challenges associated with providing internships abroad

Aside from their academic relevance, internships abroad have gained momentum because of some of their distinctive features that set them apart from all other classes, which are inexorably grounded in the teacher-student hierarchy.

Let us list a few distinctions of internships:

- In the light of the rising costs of college tuition, internships are perceived as valuable investments, capable of providing career-enhancing opportunities for the students. Research shows how internships provide opportunities for developing various professional competencies, depending on the interests of the students (Dragoo et al., 2016).
- Internships provide authentic exposure to foreign culture, de-

veloping students' cultural intelligence (Eisenberg et al., 2013) and intercultural competencies (Stebleton et al., 2012).

- Internships represent an optimal blend of formal-informal education, teaching both techniques and values associated with a given profession.
- Research shows the character-building value of internships abroad (Arranz et al., 2017), which can enhance students' entrepreneurial traits.

At the same time, when looking at the quality of the experience provided to international students, it is possible to draw a discomfoting conclusion: the factors which make an internship successful seem to rely more on chance than design. Some of the main issues associated with internship provision are as follows:

- The presence of a high language barrier affects both communication and student performance at the workplace (Ramlan et al., 2018), limiting the contribution that the resource can provide.
- Hosting organizations tend to assign students tasks requiring very limited intellectual engagement. This is mostly due to the short length of the experience (on average internships last less than 12 weeks) which does not allow for an in-depth involvement of the student in the organization's inner workings.
- On a more material level, students abroad rely on public transportation. This limits the choice of placements to those located within walking distance, or reachable through bus lines.
- Last but not least, placements are usually confirmed only once students are on site, as students often need to undergo an interview with the host organization before being officially accepted into the workplace.

These limitations prevent the education institutions from guaranteeing a standardized service quality to the students due to the many

variable factors which play into the student's experience.

Moreover, the current model leads to the misconception that the professional component outweighs the educational one.

This situation is therefore problematic. On the one hand, the current rise in internship requests would advise schools towards investing in the provision of internships; on the other hand, it is challenging for an organization to scale a service when it is not possible to guarantee a standardized quality experience (Carter et al., 2017).

3. Italian legal framework

Aside from the issues pertaining to finding the right placements and matching them with the right interns, attention must be given to the fairly strict legal framework that disciplines labor. In Italy, in particular, the *ratio legis*, which governs credit bearing internships, or *tirocini curricolari*, is based on finding a balance between providing the opportunity to advance students' skills by gaining exposure to a professional environment while at the same time discouraging the use of such activity as a form of unpaid labor. In this sense, interns need to be inserted into a program which is focused on the learning curve that students experience, as opposed to their performance or productive output.

This regulatory mindset is clearly exemplified by the list of requirements foreseen by the law, which includes:

- An alignment between the student's degree curriculum and the professional field where the student is placed.
- The academic institution and the hosting organization need to have an ongoing agreement (called *convenzione di tirocinio*), which foresees the presence of both an academic tutor and a placement supervisor in charge of managing both sides of the relationship with an intern.
- The academic institution and the hosting organization need to agree on a *progetto formativo*, namely a document detailing the learning outcomes of the experience.

As said, the Italian government adopts a protective stance towards the student in order to make sure that an academic endeavor does not turn into unpaid labor. In this sense, local regulations pose additional limitations on eligible hosting organizations, requiring them to comply with a series of requirements, which make sure that hosting interns is not a free alternative to employee recruitment. Furthermore, national laws limit the number of interns that an organization can host, based on the number of employees working for the company.

This legal framework limits the scope of internships; nevertheless, it can be viewed positively since it provides us with a valuable insight into what this experience should mean to the students, and how we can devise new formats and educational models that enhance the learning value these experiences are meant to provide.

4. Case-scenario experience: 440 Industries

Once we realize that the focus of an internship should be on the learning and job-orientation component of the experience, we find new insight into how to design an experience more capable of harvesting the students' potential and fulfilling both their passions and sense of purpose. Moreover, factors which pertain to the current student generation need to be considered (Karakas, 2015) since, if on the one hand academic institutions may be resilient to change, on the other hand students need to interact with fast-paced modern-day environments if they are to engage with new opportunities.

440 Industries is a hybrid organization designed with a cultural mission in mind. In cities like Florence, which are globally-acclaimed cultural hubs, we often see limited communication between two distinct and self-reliant groups—the local and international communities. Study abroad programs in this respect act like embassies. By creating an area of overlap between the communities, these programs are creating facilities that, despite being physically in Florence, still reflect the norms of behavior followed by international organizations.

But what if we could move beyond that and create an organiza-

tion focused on providing internship experiences which address both the needs of students and host businesses? On the one hand, this organization could recruit international talent to create teams of students willing to immerse themselves into the areas of Italian business excellence, and thereby assist business owners, entrepreneurs and managers in solving real-life problems experienced on a daily basis.

On the other hand, this organization could reach out to many small and medium enterprises which require exposure to the international community in order to develop the mindset they need to tackle internationalization and business development issues, or to solve problems where engaging with a younger audience is essential. This is exactly what 440 Industries does. It creates a middle ground between academic institutions and businesses where both sides of the relationship can get value for the time, energy and resources that are invested in these experiences. By matching willing students with businesses looking for help, a very strong and tangible relationship is instantly created. This allows for a much wider array of opportunities, which expose students to the inner workings of their client companies. Moreover, each student group can work with a variety of businesses, expanding each student's experience of organizations of varying size, culture, and field of operation.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the expanding boundaries of study abroad are providing leaders and administrators alike with the opportunity to challenge many established and conventional educational models. Initiatives like 440 Industries are led by the commitment to the new international education focus on allowing students to connect with their study abroad location, drawing on students' passion and purpose, enthusiasm and responsibility. This is what is going to elevate the significance of the time they spend abroad, enriching it with authentic and meaningful experiences.

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