

# **The Role of Work Experience in the Future Employability of Higher Education Graduates**

## **Abstract**

Many new graduates are finding it difficult to obtain graduate-level work and impossible to break into the sectors they were aiming at. In order to address this, higher education institutions are examining the methods they use to enhance student employability and deploying various measures to grow and strengthen this activity, with an increasing focus on providing work experience. One popular way of doing this is via internships (placements). This paper examines the context in which work experience has come to the fore as an approach to enhancing employability by interrogating recent research and policy related to this agenda. Employability is presented as an on-going debate which cannot be viewed as a finite entity but must move and develop with the market, society and the global situation. In addition the paper closely examines a graduate internship programme in a university in North East England. Comparing and contrasting findings from this scheme, with other examples of experiential learning through work experience, provides some evidence to suggest the value of internships and furthermore supports some formative ideas about how internships might be developed to best serve those taking part in them: interns; employers and universities.

## **Keywords:**

Graduates; employability; internship; placement; experiential learning; business-facing higher education; employer engagement; transferable skills; global graduates

## **Introduction**

Higher education is said to develop the whole person and an expected consequence of this is that graduates will be highly sought after as employees. However, the current situation globally is that many new graduates are underemployed and higher education institutions are deploying various measures to increase the employability of their students, such as including more explicit employability focused material within the programmes of study, ranging from embedded or ‘bolted-on’ modules, to ensuring that every student has the opportunity to experience the workplace through real-work projects, work placements, internships and other collaborations with businesses. Growing numbers of higher education institutions are incorporating some kind of work placement within their programmes, or occasionally adding an internship scheme at the end of the programme, to further assist unemployed graduates with the benefits of experiential learning. Internships are well established, more so in certain sectors and countries and work experience has long played a vital part in the success of sandwich courses in higher education. As well as summarising and contextualising this activity this paper will examine whether learning through experience in the workplace via internships contributes to enhancing graduate employability. An internship scheme in the north east of England is evaluated, and some comparisons made with other initiatives, to foster formative ideas on how higher education institutions can support their students to develop the skills employers require, but also the importance of engaging employers fully in such activities, in order to maximise on positive outcomes.

## **The Employability Debate**

The debate around the employability of graduates is not a new one, in fact it has been the subject of wide-ranging academic research for the past 25 years, (Holmes, 2001; Cranmer 2006; Atwood *et al.*, 2010), as well as the focus of government policy from Dearing (1997) to Higher Ambitions (DBIS, 2009) and more recently the Wilson Review (2012). More recent publications, including the Higher Education Academy’s *Pedagogy for Employability* (Pegg *et al.*, 2012), have led to the growing inclusion of employability skills in higher education undergraduate syllabuses, which has, in turn, been validated by sector-wide initiatives, such as university Employability Statements and Higher Education Achievement Reports (HEAR). Within higher education institutions’ initiatives targeting graduate employability skills have become much more obvious and are not confined to career departments and job seeking skills.

Uses of the phrase ‘employability skills’ differ; ranging from the skills essential to obtaining a job, such as interview techniques, job-searching skills and those required to create a professional *curriculum vitae*, to skills needed to carry out a job effectively, covering generic abilities (for example teamwork, organisational and communication skills), personal attributes (such as punctuality, self-confidence, discipline and adherence to deadlines) and specific/subject abilities (such as skills explicit to engineering, health and social care or law). Much has been published promoting the positive, even vital, nature of ‘being employable’; definitions encompass an individual’s propensity to gain and maintain employment (Harvey, 2001; Wilton, 2011); ‘effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy’ (CBI, 2009); and detailed, ‘...a set of achievements, understanding and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupation’ (Yorke and Knight, 2007, p. 158).

Yorke and Knight’s (2007) reference to ‘chosen occupation’ is a germane phrase helping to exemplify this as a wide-ranging and evolving agenda, as in the last ten years it has been increasingly difficult for many graduates to enter their ‘chosen occupation’, emphasising the need to be resilient and adaptable, capable of honing their profile and evolving to suit changing circumstances. This is suggested by Adecco when they described being employable as, ‘...having the skills, attitudes and belief necessary to win a job, succeed in that role, and move on to an even more fulfilling role in the future’ (Adecco, 2012, p. 40).

Analysis of graduate employability is long running and also on-going as the factors affecting it change; currently it is considerably affected by variables which include: the global recession; youth unemployment (now significantly worse than 25 years ago); an ageing workforce and many more students entering higher education, 2013 saw record numbers of university enrolments (BBC News, 2013b and Independent, 2013) indeed, the participation rates for young people, by the age of 30, has risen from 12% in 1979 to 30% in the early 1990s and 39% by 1999–00 to 49% in 2011–12 (Parliament briefing papers, 2013) resulting in many more graduates. The evolving variables mean it is imperative to keep examining employability:

We have to look at the root causes that are affecting employability, and one of the challenges we face is overcoming a school and university system focused on results, set against a global economy that values imagination, creativity and the ability to think outside the box. (Adecco, 2012, p. 17)

Whilst there are signs that the graduate labour market is improving, for example, the number of graduate vacancies is expected to rise by around 10.2% in 2014 (Garner, 2014), the employment market for graduates remains both challenging and highly competitive. 18.9% of recent graduates are unemployed (ONS, 2012) and 47% accepting low-skilled employment (ONS, 2013). Individuals are living, and remaining in employment, longer; by 2020 one third of the workforce will be over 50 years old (Houses of Parliament, 2011; Helyer and Lee, 2012). By 2018 12.8% of young people (15–24) worldwide could be unemployed (ILO, 2013). Graduate job applications have increased by between 9–25% (High Fliers, 2014, p. 32). Graduates will need to distinguish themselves by strategically using the experiential learning they gain from in-course workplace experiences if they wish to be considered by graduate recruiters. High Fliers (2014) highlight that more than half of the top graduate recruiters state that due to the very obvious benefits of work experience to an individual's skillset, graduates with work experience are prioritised in their selection processes.

Transferable and generic skills are more vital than ever in a rapidly changing world, 'forces of globalisation and technological process are altering the way that people all over the planet make a living', and (Work Foundation, 2011, p. 3) graduates need skills of adaptability and resilience to thrive in this world. In their publication *Boosting Employability Skills* CBI (2012) reported that, 'businesses want graduates who not only add value but who have the skills to help transform their organisation in the face of continuous and rapid economic and technological change' reiterating what was stated by Harvey with Green (1994) and Harvey *et al.* (1997) but now also emphasising the speed of economic and technological change.

Adapting to, indeed benefiting from, such on-going change requires certain kinds of individuals. A survey of North East employers aiming to locate skills gaps and shortages (Helyer & Lee, 2010: 29) found that employers need graduates with technical, practical and sector-specific skills but they also highly value the skills that cross sectors such as customer handling, problem solving, team-working, communication, critical thinking and leadership and management and furthermore expect graduates to have high personal standards around issues like punctuality and workplace etiquette. A recurring issue with these respondents was the speed of change within the workplace, reflecting a rapidly developing world. One interviewee commented, 'it is impossible to predict the skills we will need in the next couple of years, never mind ten years'. Reiterating research from 1997 (Harvey *et al.* 1997) and emphasising that if anything the problem is getting worse not better. The uncertainty of the

requirements of future job roles emphasises more than ever that current graduates must be adaptable as the speed of change, and new jobs and sectors developing, increases exponentially.

### **Why Experiential Learning?**

Traditionally universities have been seen as holders of knowledge and higher education associated with a more didactic style of teaching. Experiential learning links learning with activity, ‘learning and doing cannot be separated and therefore to use knowledge to its fullest potential it must be implemented, performed and enhanced as part of a synergy’ (Helyer, 2010:21). Wilson (2013) similarly, argued for the importance of experiential learning, ‘Words can be learned and repeated, it does not mean you have the skills’. Rote learning of facts is insufficient because the application of that learning, for the 21st century graduate, will be increasingly nuanced and hybrid. To facilitate this hybridity higher education institutions will be ever more strategic and future-focused, about the courses they develop and deliver and the extra activities and opportunities they offer. The learning experiences offered need to align with student’s lives and priorities, plus those of employers; ‘the higher education experience should be a holistic one, embracing the widely varying contexts in which knowledge is produced, gained built upon and used...’ (Helyer 2011, p. 103).

Part of this more rounded approach to learning is acknowledging that learning also happens outside of the classroom and facilitating work-experience opportunities for students helps them to see this for themselves. Work-based learning programmes for employed students have come to the fore in United Kingdom (UK) higher education in the last 25 years. The students on these kinds of programmes, usually called something like ‘work-based studies’ or ‘work-based and negotiated learning’, have already learned a great deal through their experience of working and they bring their experiential learning to university with them. This previous and on-going learning can be articulated, evidenced and accredited via higher education and this process can subtly alter and improve what happens in a university, because it offers a different way of learning and potentially share new knowledge. Learning in the workplace is ‘situated, participatory and socially mediated’ (Eames and Bell, 2005) and these elements can make higher education more multi-faceted and realistic. Employed work-based learning students do not need to be sent on placements to experience the workplace, indeed they are invaluable in bringing information and knowledge based on real life employability, from their workplace, into the academy. Work-based students may require a higher education

institution to formalise their learning into recognised qualifications but are very often expert practitioners, sometimes more highly skilled in their own area of expertise than their tutor (who operates in this scenario in the role of facilitator, not teacher). This can challenge the *status quo* and is a reminder of the learning happening in the workplace. The breadth and depth of knowledge and expertise demonstrated by work-based learners confirms the value of work experience:

Students who just focus on their degree studies without spending time in the workplace are unlikely to develop the skills and interests that graduate employers are looking for (Birchall, 2013)

However, it is not sufficient for students to just ‘experience’ the workplace passively, they need to actively engage in order to learn, ‘learning is the product of students’ efforts to interpret, and translate what they experience in order to make meaning of it’ (Cooper *et al.*, 2010, p. 62). This requires honed skills of reflection, in order to reflect effectively on what they have *learned* from the experience, acknowledge and build upon this learning:

Supporting students to reflect (effectively) on their studies and work experience is crucial. It is not just the possession of knowledge or skills that define a graduate and the contribution she (or he) makes to the workplace, it is the capacity to articulate them, to think about how they relate to other forms of knowledge and skills, and to reflect upon the different domains in which they may be applied. Being reflective requires a thinking process that understands strengths and weaknesses and seeks means for their enhancement (Wilson, 2012:39).

Reflection is long established in work-based learning practice, as a tool of enquiry; with research confirming that reflection on work-based learning causes practitioners to review the values underpinning their practice (Siebert and Costley, 2013). Work experience allows students and graduates to reflect on and put into practice what they have learned from formal study and furthermore to develop transferable, employability skills, within a real workplace; placing students and graduates with appropriate businesses as interns is one way of facilitating this crucial experience and consequently experiential learning. For students, an internship might be taken up during holiday periods or after graduation and, as a trainee, can offer real learning opportunities. Certainly research (undertaken by Teesside and Bedfordshire Universities) suggested that internships are considered by academics as one of the best ways to embed experiential learning and enable individuals to develop the transferable skills and understanding of the workplace *prior* to moving into the employment market. Over 50% of the respondents (23 from 40) stated that they were using internships and

placements to build workplace-learning opportunities into their courses (Helyer & Corkill, 2014).

### **Are Internships Part of the Answer?**

Guile and Lahiff (2013, p. 3) described good internships as providing an experience of working that helps graduates in:

Developing expertise (knowledge, skill and judgement) and identity, but also helping to develop: a) entrepreneurial flair so they can assist a business to grow; and b) social capital, that is, the networks to help them to secure permanent/contract-based employment or self-employment.

In some sectors, internships are well established, not just as a way to experience real workplace learning but as an apprenticeship or rite of passage to certain professions, where they are considered the conventional route to employment, even part of the recruitment and interview process; this is particularly the case in finance, journalism and the creative industries. Wilson (2012) suggested that, following the United States (USA) model, internships in the UK are becoming more like an extended interview process; research supports this:

A decade ago, the main reason that many major graduate employers offered university students work placements was simply to help individuals decide which career sector they were suited to and to enable students to experience the type of work that graduates did in a particular industry or business area... Now, for the majority of employers who offer work experience places, such schemes have become an integral part of recruiting new graduates (High Fliers, 2014:35).

Two thirds of employers surveyed by High Fliers provided paid vacation internships for penultimate year students, whilst three-fifths offered undergraduate industrial placements, which typically last 6–12 months as part of a university degree course. University intern programmes can be instrumental in preparing students for company schemes. Furthermore, 37% of 2014's entry-level positions at the top 100 graduate employers are expected to be filled by graduates who have already worked for the organisations through paid internships, industrial placements or holiday work and therefore will not be open to other students from the 'Class of 2014' (High Fliers, 2014). For example, Centrica's internship programme has grown from 11 places in 2006, to 75 in 2010 (a recruiting level that has been maintained to 2014); in 2011 38% of their graduate intake was from this programme. Furthermore, in other sectors such as investment banking, up to 80% of positions are filled by graduates who had previously undertaken an internship with the company (Briggs and Daly, 2012). Examining

the webpages of UK higher education institutions clearly shows the large number that are now offering their students and graduates workplace internship schemes. What follows is an analysis of one of these:

### **The Teesside University Graduate Internship Programme: how it works**

Launched in 2011–12, the ‘Graduate Internship Programme’ offers Teesside University graduates a 12-week paid work-experience opportunity with a local employer; integrated into this are personal development days at the University.

The programme supports recent graduates to:

- learn from real-life work experience and graduate level employment;
- develop key employability skills;
- gain an insight into real-work environments and business etiquette;
- inform their career and progression choices;
- progress their job-seeking skills, such as effective job application and interview skills;
- begin to form networks with practitioners;
- build confidence;
- make connections between their studies and the workplace.

The University has an ethos of widening participation and community engagement and has traditionally recruited from a diverse pool of individuals from the local area. The internship programme also aims to create and embed an increasing numbers of graduate-levels jobs in the locality and, therefore, going forward have a positive influence on talent retention in the region. For example, several interns took on specific projects within the local, recently re-opened, steelworks:

As a university we aim to equip all our students with the necessary talents to succeed in the workplace. The re-opening of the steelworks in Redcar is a great story for the region and we are delighted that these graduate interns can play a part in being able to tell that story’ (Teesside course leader).

Inevitably, the location of a large company’s head office also has an impact on the graduate’s ultimate location. The internship programme increases levels of employer engagement by enhancing and building upon existing relationships and partnerships the University has with



businesses and forging new relationships with different companies. The employers involved in the programme are located across the North East, however some companies are the local branch of a much larger national or international company and, whilst at present opportunities have not been located further afield than the North East, there is potential for this to be developed in future, supporting the development of global graduates.

The university has a team of business account managers in regular contact across all sectors who promote the intern programme. In 2013, the University additionally trialled an external consultant, who was successful in engaging a greater breadth of businesses who offered internship places, including companies with which the University had not previously worked. There is evidence of increasing numbers of schemes where third-party bodies, such as the Mountbatten Institute, develop the relationships with the businesses, place the graduates as interns and run the programme, whilst the higher education institutions provides a qualification, often a masters level certificate, diploma or full degree. This kind of arrangement requires robust quality assurance to protect all parties as outlined in the *UK Quality Code for Higher Education* 'Chapter B10: Managing higher education provision with others' (QAA, 2013) but does offer a new route to potential business partners. There is also growing evidence that this is enabling the university to reach marginal companies that may have otherwise been missed; often small to medium enterprises (SMEs) and companies who had never considered employing a graduate, 44 out of the 87 host companies were SMEs. This point has been increasingly recognised by organisations, for example, Santander recently pledged to treble places on its SME internship scheme, which provides financial support for interns in SMEs (The Telegraph, 2013).

Employers submit an outline project brief summarising the graduate level job role the intern will undertake; in 2012–13 152 projects were submitted by 109 employers from sectors including manufacturing, engineering, information, communication and technology, the arts, entertainment and recreation sectors. The majority of companies required skills in business and marketing, computing and web, and media and journalism. More than half (59%) of all submitted proposals did not specify a named degree. However, the need for marketing skills reflects a national trend (HECSU, 2013, p. 9). After consideration of the proposed job roles by a panel of relevant university staff, 87 graduates were formally interviewed and recruited in a competitive process (more than a 50% increase from 2011–2012); Although the interns were from a range of subject backgrounds, the majority of them were arts graduates,

including media, television and film production and graphic design, photography, history, English and fine art degrees. The total of 38 interns from these areas was more than 50% greater than the number from any other academic school, however given that it is established practice for arts and humanities students to undertake internships, have portfolio careers, be self-employed and undertake consultancy as part of the type of degree subject or career pathway they have chosen, this was perhaps to be expected. It was also noticeable that there were interns from all academic schools, with the exception of the School of Health and Social Care, however, the qualifications undertaken in this school have specific vocational pathways and 1 in 5 graduate employment opportunities in the North East are for health professionals (HECSU, 2013:9). The academic profile of graduates recruited to the programme also varied greatly, both the entry tariff points (from 100–500 plus) and degree classification achieved. Almost half of interns achieved an upper-second-class degree; furthermore 17 out of the 87 achieved a first-class degree. In the past similar schemes may have been offered solely for those graduates needing extra support but in the current highly competitive jobs market every job seeker needs support.

### **Evaluating the Programme**

The evaluation (March–April 2013) analysed the impact of the intern programme experience on graduates, employers and the University together with key implementation issues; the research methodology included desk research, analysis of university electronic data collection systems in relation to student profiles and data and interrogation of university electronic Customer Relationship Management (CRM) to establish levels of business engagement. In addition feedback was gathered from both interns and host organisations through a variety of mechanisms including: a self-audit, the ‘Graduate Readiness Questionnaire’ (undertaken at the beginning and end of programme); an online employer end-survey; in depth face-to-face employer interviews, and an evaluation day for the interns (which included a questionnaire). The information collated was analysed for both the current programme and longitudinally and is represented in the paper both through tables and quotations. The quotations are attributed by number to maintain respondent anonymity.

### **Evaluation Findings**

In 2011, interns reported their occasional confusion about who their university contact would be if they had any questions, this was resolved by clearly signposting Student Services as the ‘home’ of the internship programme. This has resulted in a much more seamless feel to the

running of the programme and response to the evaluation was very positive, with interns and employers commenting on the ‘authentic experience’ the programme offered. The majority of graduates (57%) found the programme both enjoyable and useful, citing the workplace element as the best aspect:

It was a fruitful and enjoyable experience. (TU intern, R12)

I felt I learned a lot just by doing the job. (TU intern, R16)

It was good having responsibility and being trusted. (TU intern, R7)

I gained an insight into the industry. (TU intern, R60)

It was great learning from industry professionals. (TU intern, R49)

When asked why they wanted to participate in the internship programme the majority of interns answered, ‘it was an opportunity to experience paid work’, with other popular responses, ‘to gain work experience’ and ‘to develop employability skills’. In the majority of cases the interns cited all three reasons, highlighting that graduates have recognised that a workplace internship can significantly enhance their *curriculum vitae* and ultimately their employability.

Workplaces covered a variety of activities and approaches, depending on the size and nature of the company. Most employers had demarcated projects in mind, whilst others embedded the interns within broader existing work teams:

The intern was like another team member. (Host organisation, R22)

They got involved in everything. (Host organisation, R19)

Despite the variety of workplaces, 81% of interns felt that the activities included those described in the job description but often other tasks were involved and occasionally tasks undertaken were more substantial and stretching than expected. Some employers reported that they had increased the difficulty of the planned tasks, due to the obvious capability of the graduate and the workplace necessity for multi-tasking:

It was more than I expected, I got to manage my own project and helped to develop some long-term strategies. I felt like I got a lot out of the experience (TU intern, R11)

I thought I would be doing some customer service and basic admin work but I was actually given an interesting variety of tasks, some of which really tested and developed my abilities. (TU intern, R31)

I did a bit of everything, it was more than I expected but I was happy to do more. (TU intern, R4)

When invited to reflect on the scheme the graduates realised the opportunities presented to them, underlining the crucial need to include formalised reflection skills development in the programme. This enabled individuals to reflect on action (Schon, 1991). At the evaluation day, graduates commented on the insights they had gained into business etiquette by working alongside practitioners and their new realisations about the crucial nature of experiencing relevant work practice first hand. Graduates who were integrated into existing work teams in particular commented on how realistic their experience, across a wide range of activities within a company, had been and how much they have learned from that. Despite the graduate interns having undertaken higher education level projects as part of their studies the transition to working in a real workplace was a tangible step change for some and provided evidence of, together with the opportunity to put into practice, the skills they have developed throughout their academic studies; furthermore, it also often validated their subject content choices at degree level:

What I did in the workplace really built on my degree. (TU intern, R38)

I enjoyed working on something that related to my degree. (TU intern, R8)

Being in the company really integrated my academic studies into real life work—I loved it! (TU intern, R52)

This highlights that the combination of multiple learning is a powerful development tool, as suggested by others (Coll & Eames, 2004; Little and Harvey, 2006).

The interns were also positive about the induction day and development workshops spread throughout the 12-week programme. Delivered by the University's Student Services and Learning and Development departments and focusing on career management skills; personal development; self-awareness; purposeful reflection and teambuilding the workshops were well attended, with some sessions viewed as more relevant than others. The research indicated that 51% of interns found the development workshops useful or very useful;

sessions identified as being of the most use were the teambuilding exercises, curriculum vitae workshop, interview practice and facilitated reflection,

At first I didn't understand why we were doing teambuilding activities with the other interns, rather than with our teams at work, however the messages from the activities undertaken as part of the development sessions were actually really useful at work. (TU intern, R12)

I really enjoyed the development sessions back at the University and they helped me to think about what I was learning at work – and it was a lot! (TU intern, R31)

The sessions about interview skills made me reflect on my previous experiences. I now feel more confident about interviews. (TU intern, R65)

From an employer perspective, over half of those interviewed (56%) stated that the sessions had been useful for their intern, with some recognising that they had contributed to improved skills and confidence:

They seemed to boost the intern's confidence. (Host organisation, R23)

Our intern found some of the workshops really useful. (Host organisation, R29)

I would have liked to tie what the intern was doing in our company more directly with the development workshops as they were very obviously engaged with them. (Host organisation, R22)

The graduates' responses made it obvious that the overall programme was improved by the integration of some facilitated development sessions. A self-audit, the 'Graduate Readiness Questionnaire', was completed at the beginning and end of the programme and designed to chart the development of the intern's skills. Graduates were encouraged to reflect purposefully and honestly (a completely anonymous exercise) on their existing level of skills and to think about where they needed to learn and develop further whilst experiencing the workplace. Reflection was key to completing the questionnaire. As Figure 1 shows, the areas where the interns felt they had developed the most were (questionnaire wording):

I know where to look for jobs that would suit me.

I know how and where to find out information about graduate employers.

I know how to write applications that will be successful.

These were the same areas that graduates felt *least* confident about prior to the internship, suggesting that the Programme offers real help to graduates in areas they most need it. Conversely the areas where the graduates had felt *more* ready prior to the internship were:

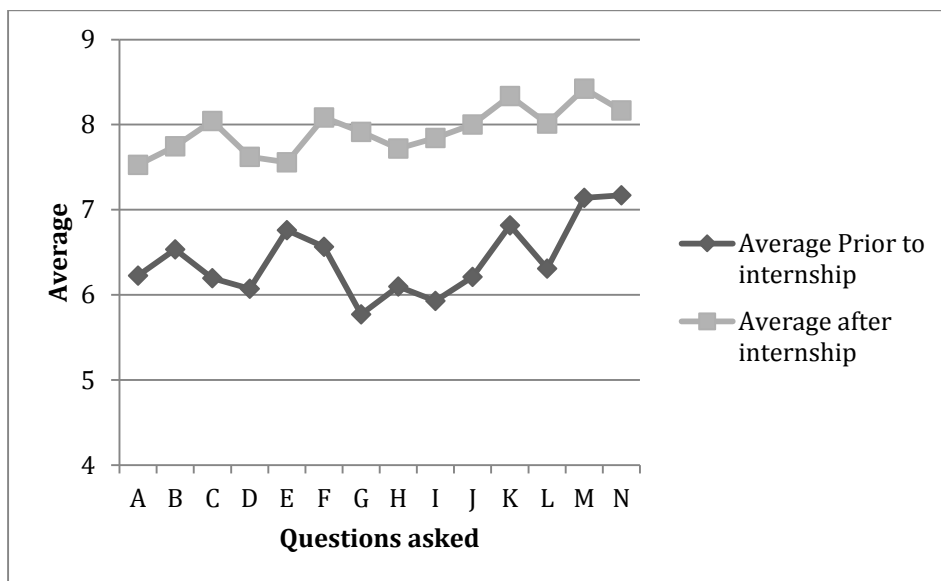
I am able to reflect on and appraise my own performance.

I am aware of my own strengths and weaknesses.

I am confident that I will be able to deliver what is asked of me in a graduate job.

Yet these were the areas with the *smallest* improvement over the three months. This suggests that the work experience element of the programme has operated as something of a reality check for these graduates:

the development sessions and skills tracking exercise were really useful, they helped me develop an awareness of what I was good at; it wasn't necessarily what I thought!  
(TU intern, R18 Graduate intern)



Key			
A	I feel confident about my ability to compete in the graduate labour market.	H	I am confident that I would perform well in an interview.
B	I understand what qualities employers expect from graduates.	I	I know how to write applications that will be successful.
C	I know where to look for the jobs that would suit me.	J	I know what is expected of me in a graduate role.
D	I feel confident about my future.	K	I am confident I will be able to deliver what is asked of me in a graduate job.
E	I know what I would like my career to be.	L	I know how to 'sell' my strengths, skills and experience to employers.
F	I know what I need to do to be successful.	M	I am aware of my own strengths and weaknesses.
G	I know how and where to find out information about graduate employers.	N	I am able to reflect on and appraise my own performance.

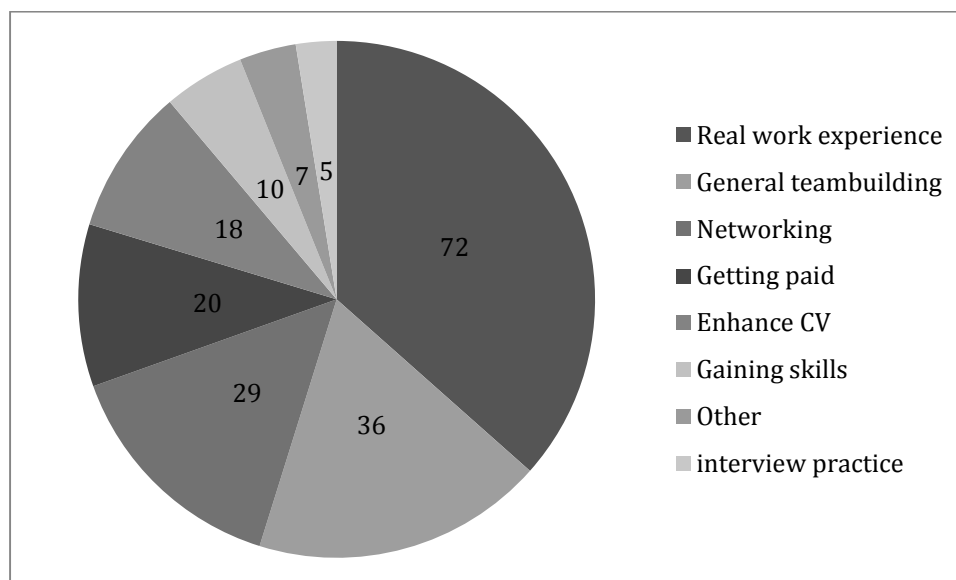
Figure 1: Graduate readiness questionnaire results

From the final evaluation questionnaire, graduates identified skills, experience and confidence as the top three benefits of participating in the internship (Figure 2):

The experience has been priceless—I can't believe how much I have learned in three months. (TU intern, R30)

I have developed new skills in a professional capacity. (TU intern, R34)

I feel I have developed lots of new skills (including skills for life) and enhanced my knowledge. (TU intern, R61)



**Figure 2: key benefits of participating in the Graduate Intern Programme (interns choosing up to 3)**

The perceived benefits of the programme are further evidenced by the extremely positive progression outcomes (from the 2012–13, cohort (Table 1); more than one quarter of interns progressed into employment, an encouraging outcome in itself but especially positive when considering that youth unemployment is 14.1% in Tees Valley compared to 7.2% nationally (TVU, 2014). More than half of those progressing into employment were offered full-time jobs with the company where they undertook the internship and 9% secured places on high profile graduate schemes with large national companies, including Pets at Home and Marks and Spencer: ‘the Teesside Internship was an amazing opportunity; it launched my career’. This suggests engagement between companies with their own graduate schemes and university are fruitful.

**Table 1: Progression Data of graduate interns**

Progression	Number	%
Employment	23	26.44
Graduates for Business scheme	18	20.69
Not known	15	17.24
Unemployed	8	9.20
Internship extension	6	6.90

Temp Employment	4	4.60
Other	4	4.60
Volunteering	3	3.45
Left early	2	2.30
Applying for further study	2	2.30
Self employed	2	2.30
<b>Total</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Top graduate employers recruit from a distinct group of universities (High Fliers 2014); the Teesside University Graduate Intern Programme aims to develop the graduate’s profiles and encourage employers to view Teesside recruits as first choice, ‘This is the first Teesside Graduate I have employed and I am very impressed. If all Teesside graduates are like this I would like to employ more’ (TU internship programme – host organisation). A fifth of the programme’s graduates registered for Teesside University’s Graduates for Business initiative (a careers guidance scheme), 7% of interns had their internship extended and 2% continued to work at the company where they undertook their internship on a voluntary basis (both these companies are voluntary sector organisations, suggesting that if funds had been available they would have gained paid employment).

The progression statistics highlight the value of the intern programme in enabling graduates to articulate and develop transferable skills; some of the real success stories are those individuals who had low entry tariff points and degree classifications yet secured permanent employment by the end of their internship. For example: Student A entered university with 100 tariff points and graduated with a BA Business Management degree (pass). After graduating the student worked part-time at two non-graduate jobs but kept applying for full-time permanent work. As a Teesside graduate the student was able to apply to the Graduate Intern Programme. Through the programme the intern worked with the marketing team for a global company. After six weeks the company offered the graduate a full-time permanent position as a marketing analyst, which he accepted.

Employers were pleased with the calibre of the graduates, (65% stated they met their needs and expectations) finding them, ‘bright, capable, enthusiastic, good at interaction and emotionally intelligent’. Any negative comments about the graduates’ performance were very few and tended to focus on immature or naïve attitudes, rather than capability. The majority of employers felt that the graduate had exceeded their expectations and were pleased with the



skills demonstrated by them, which included: creativity; a can-do approach; and ability to undertake key tasks within the organisation.

The majority of employers who were interviewed felt that the interns had had a positive effect on their company and their experience of the Programme has been the stimulus for businesses engaging further with the University on various projects including summer internships, knowledge transfer partnerships, master classes and work placements. Furthermore many also felt that they could offer advice and support in delivery of the intern programme; 'Employers participating in the programme should be viewed as a useful resource, with their products, services and expertise maximised upon to enhance the programme'(host organisation, R10). This feedback was acted upon and the first of a programme of events was a well-attended business breakfast in September 2013. There were also several offers to work with the programme team interviewing, selecting and developing the interns with a view to embedding and strengthening the partnership ethos of the programme. As seen from above, this 'stakeholder integrated approach' (as suggested by Harvey and Moon, 1997) not only helps to manage employer expectations about the programme but also engenders a greater understanding of organisational culture and academic culture and facilitates the development of successful partnerships. Evaluation of the programme establishes the usefulness of internships in developing graduate employability via work experience and also offering multiple value to the intern, the employer, the university and the region:

Teesside University's stated intention to move closer to business is a great philosophy and they do it very well. I've been very pleased with the graduate placement process. I needed a young, fresh team and they're all very committed and enthusiastic (Intern host company).

### **Comparisons with other programmes**

Comparing the programme to similar initiatives, including the wider applications of work experience placements, raises some interesting points.

Now in its fourth year, Third Sector Internships Scotland (TSIS) offers students from all Scottish universities paid internships in charities, social enterprises and voluntary

organisations. There are similarities with the Teesside programme, in particular the defined project undertaken by the interns, the interns' predominant degree subject areas and the outcomes and benefits of the schemes. TSIS differs from the Teesside Programme in a number of ways including: host organisation (third sector), length of internships (ranging from 58 hours to 350 hours) and timing of work experience (part-time, prior to graduation). Employers and interns from both schemes express similar sentiments, with employers commenting positively on the standard of interns and the quality of the work they had undertaken, several stating that an intern brings a fresh perspective to their organisation and enables focussed and output-orientated projects to be undertaken:

Without TSIS, a very valuable piece of work may never have been conducted due to the time and capacity issues. (TSIS internship provider)

This same point was raised by several Teesside employers and suggests that the workplace required a short-term intervention or consultancy in order to carry out a one-off, innovative piece of work and whilst this may not point to a full-time job for the graduate it does offer more evidence of the portfolio style of career than many individuals will have in the future.

What connects this and similar schemes are the advantages of learning from an authentic workplace experience. Billet (2011) wrote about the power of 'experiential learning', reiterating that, as a phrase, it encompasses the wider application of workplace learning to include work-based learning, co-operative learning, work integrated learning, internships and work placements. In the USA, internships and co-operative education are defined as, 'structured educational strategy that integrates class studies with learning through productive work experience, related to the student's academic or career goals' (USA National Commission for Coop Education, 2010), both are a major part of the United States higher education system.

Institutions in the USA in particular show a strong belief in the benefit of internships with some institutions requiring students to complete a minimum of one internship during their studies to pass their course. (BIS 2011, p. 96)

For example, students from Drexel University spend half of each academic year (of a three-year programme) in industry and therefore graduate with 18 months of professional experience, not unlike the UK thin sandwich course (BIS 2011).

Canada, Australia and New Zealand also provide many examples of co-operative education and examples of work-integrated learning, 'activities which integrate academic theory with the practice of work' (Kay, 2013). Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand has developed a successful Co-op; the Bachelor of Sport and Recreation degree combines two days in a company (equivalent to 350 hours over a year) and two days at the University, which run concurrently, ensuring that the students 'learn through work in an authentic experience' (Fleming and Hickey, 2013) The comments made by the students in New Zealand echo those made by Teesside interns, for example, it felt challenging, 'thrown in at the deep end', 'supervising others' but overall was a good and very useful, experience, 'being accepted', 'meeting people I would never have met', 'working alongside experts', 'learning professional behaviours and tricks of the trade', 'being accepted as a member of a professional community' and:

I learnt through moving outside my comfort zone and doing things I was not sure about. I also made myself do things, and attempt to do things, even though I sometimes wasn't sure of what I was doing, but I did do that. It helped me to learn from my mistakes and how I could do things better (Student from Auckland University of Technology).

Evaluation of the Teesside Programme reinforces the multiple benefits to be gained from experiential learning and there is a powerful argument for embedding experiential learning opportunities into degree programmes by integrating employability modules, skills and work-experience placements, to help students to leave university job-ready.

### **Learning Points**

The employability skills agenda has been established via long and fulsome debate however 'employability' is not a fixed notion and it will change and evolve with the market and world. Part of this is the balance between subject-specific, generic and personal skills, with many companies realising that they need an adaptable workforce to survive constant change and future challenges. Challenges posed by an economy in recession include multi-skilling becoming ever more vital, as teams are slimmed down and employers expect added value from each employee, 'I was surprised by the variety of tasks I was asked to undertake in the workplace' (TU intern, R32). By spending time in a real workplace students and graduates are alerted to the fact that they will be expected to multi-task, perhaps more than they expected and, perhaps more than they are comfortable with. It is increasingly insufficient to only have knowledge and skills in one area, again emphasising the importance of adaptability

and flexibility. The high percentage of employers engaging with the Teesside scheme who targeted interns from sectors different to their own emphasised this need for cross-cutting skills.

As the job market becomes more competitive the timing of the student's work experience opportunity is potentially vital, 'I wish I had known this earlier' (TU intern, R63).

As Higson suggested, 'internships should be seen as a way of gaining valuable employability skills while *still at* university (Higson, 2012, emphasis added) and similarly 'the importance of gaining work experience *at* university has become a prerequisite for finding employment upon graduation' (Trought, 2012:65, emphasis added).

There is evidence from the Teesside evaluation that post-graduation initiatives are also helpful, 'such support should also continue after students have graduated (...) a one stop shop offering graduates the best local paid and voluntary internships, for up to a year' (Higson, 2012). However, they require extra resources and future funding regimes could mitigate against this. Employers may be required to, at least jointly, fund these post-graduation schemes; evaluation of the Teesside programme illustrated that employers recognise this, with 57.1% stating a willingness to fund future internships (dependent on financial resources and other caveats).

As Docherty (2012) suggested, 'Across the world, governments are trying to make sense of how to be successful when this recession ...is over'. Facilitating *undergraduate* internships can work as part of developing students into resourceful change agents, who work across the business university interface to genuinely transfer and create knowledge. This reciprocal creating and sharing of knowledge requires the intern to spend time both in the workplace and the University; Guile and Lahiff (2013, p. 17) recommended '...combining workplace learning and study as a means of knowledge acquisition and skill formation'. This could be via undergraduate and postgraduate study or, as with the Teesside programme, via customised development workshops. The Teesside evaluation evidences that both employers and graduates commented on the added value of the University development workshops to the extent that development workshops, especially reflection on action, should be prioritised in future programmes and also offered in vacation time (especially where there is an established summer university offer) so that more students can benefit. Some employers

suggested that the development programme would work well as a 'boot camp' type experience in between years of study, or between study and work.

Whilst discussing timing, several respondents suggested that the work placement would be even more useful if it lasted longer, "It has taken three months for the intern to really get to know the company and become useful, they have learned a lot, we could do with another three months now for *us* to really get something out of the relationship" (host organisation, R22) This is further supported by research commissioned by the Edge Foundation, 'A key factor in the usefulness of work experience and placements was the duration of the experience...it had to be six months and preferably longer' (Lowden *et al.*, 2011, p. 14); seven of the Teesside interns were asked to stay in post for an additional three months. Confirming the findings of a body of research that has been building since the 1990's (for example Harvey *et al.* 1998).

## **Conclusion**

Traditionally, higher education study has equipped graduates with learning and research skills, enabling them to innovate, think independently, as well as make informed judgements and arguments; the best graduates have always been attractive to employers. However, the combination of economic pressures, further competition and employer' demands means that graduates need to continually develop themselves, to rise and adapt to new challenges and an entrepreneurial future. As Wilson claims, including work experience in higher education programmes, 'helps students to be better in the context of their own lives and employment' (Wilson, 2013). The manner in which workers are employed is changing. Growing numbers of graduates will set up their own businesses, work in highly specialist micro-businesses, work on several short-term contracts simultaneously, be self-employed, therefore relying on effective experiential learning to cope with required changes in their practice and profile. As stated above, there are growing numbers of entrants to higher education and, along with this high probability of eclectic careers, they will also be coping with increased student debt. The combination of this with the increased transparency of university achievements in graduate employability (for example key information sets and Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey) means that they are highly likely to view learning as a route to meaningful employment and consequently have greater expectations of their university experience and outcomes.

The evaluation of the graduate internship programme at Teesside, examined in the context of the current employment landscape demonstrates that the combination of subject knowledge and real-life workplace experience, perhaps via an internship, provides a catalyst for future innovation, development and success. The third iteration of the programme has commenced with the number of internships almost trebling over three years (from 46 to 87 to 120). This rapid increase confirms the scheme as a good route to new employer-university relationships as well as the value of internships to employers and the local community.

As more longitudinal data is collected meaningful comparisons with *Destination of Leavers from Higher Education* figures will be facilitated around student destinations, in particular, progression into graduate jobs. Evaluation of the 2014 programme will drill down into the differences between subject areas; look for further lessons to be learned from best practice and innovation from the UK, USA, Australia and Europe; investigate offering an authentic working experience to *all* undergraduate students and involve employers as fully as possible (as recommended by Guile and Lahiff, 2013), in order to develop deeper professional relationships and to support the vital importance and productivity of universities and employers working together.

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