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The academic value of internships: Benefits across disciplines and student backgrounds



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ABSTRACT

While student benefits from internship experience have been frequently documented in research, the emphasis has been on internship effects on employment and career indicators. This work is concerned with effects on academic outcomes and focuses on the robustness of such effects across academic disciplines as well as for different achievement levels of students, student gender, and ethnicity. We present findings from a longitudinal sample (n > 15,000) that covers an extensive range of subjects and disciplines for large undergraduate cohorts. Main effects and interactions for student background characteristics were investigated showing stable academic benefits for advantaged and disadvantaged students. Further, using ordinal logistic multi-level modelling, we explored the impact on the probability of attaining a higher degree classification for different student scenarios, thus illustrating the practical significance of these internship effects. Effects are less likely to stem from maturation or self-selection. Findings are therefore discussed against a background of motivational approaches suitable to integrate both direct and indirect paths from internship experience to academic outcomes to career indicators.

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1. Introduction

Internships as voluntary, temporary work placements, often undertaken by students at the university and college levels, have been hailed as win–win situations for both employers and internees (Coco, 2000). Employers do not have to commit to actual employment, and internees can further their (future) career. Clearly, internships feature prominently when it comes to the employability of graduates from higher education (e.g., Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2000), and in recent years universities across the Western world have increasingly acknowledged the importance of career-furthering measures (Bridgstock, 2009; Smith, McKnight, & Naylor, 2000). Yet, the exact benefits of internships, and how these are brought about, remain a matter of ongoing debate (Narayanan, Olk, & Fukami, 2010). The present work aims to add to this debate by focusing on the academic value of internships and their direct effects on study outcomes.

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There is little doubt that internships can have a direct and positive effect on a number of career indicators, at least under the right circumstances (for recent reviews, see Knouse & Fontenot, 2008; Narayanan et al., 2010). Studies specifically relating to business education and training have shown that, compared to no such experience, internships are associated with greater perceived attractiveness of job applicants to recruiters (Taylor, 1988), with graduates obtaining a job more quickly and more easily (Knouse, Tanner, & Harris, 1999), and with higher salary levels as well as increased job satisfaction (Gault et al., 2000).

In contrast, less emphasis has been put on internship outcomes within higher education. In a recent synthesis of the existing literature, Narayanan et al. (2010) have drawn up an integrative model of internship effectiveness, which addresses academic preparedness as an antecedent variable, but omits any academic benefits from student outcomes. This is supplemented by students' own perceptions, who have been shown to attribute substantial social and career-related value to internships, but no academic value that would feed back into their studies (Cannon & Arnold, 1998; Cook, Parker, & Pettijohn, 2004). Empirical studies conducted in educational contexts so far suggest, however, that an internship experience directly impacts on final grades and degree classes (Gomez, Lush, & Clements, 2004; Mandilaras, 2004; Mansfield, 2011; Rawlings, White, & Stephens, 2005; Reddy & Moores, 2006).

The first aim of the current work, therefore, is to integrate effects and processes that relate to higher education with literature on

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organisational settings and career development concerns.¹ The second aim is to empirically demonstrate such educational effects. In doing so, our study will go beyond prior research through an in-depth investigation of student demographics, variation across academic disciplines and controls for self-selection.

For a thorough investigation of the internship-university link, a number of student demographics are considered that are well known to be associated with study outcomes, namely gender, ethnicity and scholastic aptitude. Some studies (e.g., Gomez et al., 2004) have controlled for some of these factors in order to obtain a good estimate of effect size. In the present work, we are more concerned with interactions between internship experience and background characteristics in order to estimate internship effects for different student groups. This can then indicate, for example, whether internships are more or less effective for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Another area of enquiry concerns the stability of effects across different academic disciplines. Studies so far have thrown a spotlight on individual degree courses (Gomez et al., 2004; Mandilaras, 2004; Mansfield, 2011; Rawlings et al., 2005; Reddy & Moores, 2006), and most studies concerned with career indicators have been conducted within business schools (Narayanan et al., 2010). These findings, however, cannot capture the full variation in terms of gender composition, ethnic diversity and scholastic aptitude to be found within a full-scale university, let alone the variation in standards and learning climates on different courses. Lastly, we are concerned with the problem of self-selection. Where research has focused on optional internships, clear a priori differences have been documented between students with and without internship experience. As in all field settings, this weakens any argument that assigns a causal role to internships in raising academic performance.

In the following, we will elaborate on these points by discussing, firstly, the current status of internships in higher education and, secondly, the factors that need to be considered for documenting a general, positive effect of internships on academic outcomes. We will then go on to present findings from a large, longitudinal student sample, spanning a broad range of academic subjects to reliably estimate an internship effect while controlling for past academic achievements and student demographics.

1.1. Internships and higher education

It is to be expected that internships will increasingly turn into a core interest for the higher education sector. In recent years, nonacademic graduate attributes such as career management skills have become more attractive for universities to sport, mostly in order to meet the demands of prospective employers (Bridgstock, 2009). A number of internationally important university rankings, such as the *Financial Times University Ranking* in the US and *The Times Good University Guide* in the UK, include indicators of postgraduate career success (Clarke, 2007). All of this increased interest, then, is driven by an employability agenda. If internships have a direct causal effect on career indicators, universities are well advised to invest in internships alongside traditional, academic teaching and training.

But what about effects on academic achievement? Anecdotal evidence suggests that excellent students come with excellent references, including internship experience. Past research has shown that brighter students, those with better grades, are more likely to get into an internship (Knouse & Fontenot, 2008; Knouse et al., 1999; Taylor, 1988). We find the opposite causal direction, however, to be of much higher practical relevance. Improved academic performance owing to internships could have a substantial indirect effect on students' value on the job market, given that study outcomes are routinely treated as central predictors of employment (see Smith et al., 2000). Roth and Clarke (1998), in their meta-analysis, found an overall correlation of .20 between academic performance (grades) and starting salary, as well as correlations from .20 to .30 between grades and current salary. Further benefits of increased academic performance include a reduction in stress and improved adjustment to new life circumstances (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001). Our theoretical understanding, then, distinguishes between two causal paths from internships to career indicators, one direct and one indirect by means of influencing academic performance.² This helps to further highlight the importance of investigating links between internships and academic outcomes.

So far, studies that have included information on both internships and study outcomes have been struggling with resolving the inherent confound between the two variables (Gault et al., 2000; Knouse et al., 1999; Taylor, 1988), in part due to the level of rigour in the statistical analyses. Although several studies have hinted at academic benefits to date (Gomez et al., 2004; Mandilaras, 2004; Mansfield, 2011; Rawlings et al., 2005; Reddy & Moores, 2006), there is little stringent evidence for a causal link between internships and study outcomes. Most convincingly so far, Gomez et al. (2004) found a relationship between internships in the second year of an undergraduate bioscience degree course and final marks in the third year while controlling for pre-university qualifications, prior academic achievements, and gender. On a percentage scale, the net effect of an internship experience amounted to an increase of 4 percentage points in final marks. With these findings, however, there is still room for substantial student self-selection since the authors report on a UK degree system that normally allows students to choose between a degree course with or without internship, even after they have commenced their studies (Little & Harvey, 2006). A similar criticism applies to other research in the field. We believe this can be overcome by, first of all, looking at a range of degree courses and comparing effects not only for corresponding courses with and without internships, but also for courses that never provide an internship option and those where internship is integral to the course (and therefore, in some sense, compulsory).

1.2. Student background characteristics and internship effects

Closely related to the issue of self-selection, as discussed above, is the question of student background characteristics: Would we expect internships to be equally effective for different categories of students? A prominent factor in this context is ethnicity. It is a wellestablished finding that in Western, mixed-ethnic societies, most non-white students, and in particular Blacks, show lower academic achievements (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995; Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006; Kao & Thompson, 2003; Nora & Cabrera, 1996). Without going here into any details concerning the underlying reasons for this minority disadvantage, it is important to note that Whites are also more likely to take up an internship than Blacks (Knouse et al., 1999), thus potentially furthering the gap. This is particularly troublesome in those academic disciplines where internships are far from the norm and require more student initiative in terms of set-up.

¹ In light of the relevant literature, there is a tendency towards the term 'internship' in the US, in contrast to, for example, the UK and Australia where 'placement' is more commonly used. Further, internship is more accepted than placement in the areas of organisational behaviour and management. For our purposes, we will adopt the term internship throughout this work.

² Further, as already stated, academic performance also facilitates access to internships, but in the interest of clarity, we are not concerned with bi-directional causality at this stage. Later analyses include a crucial comparison of compulsory vs. voluntary internships and thus provide a check on the assumptions implicit in this simplified model.

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