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Internships at Greek universities: an exploratory study

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Abstract

Purpose – Greece has the highest youth unemployment rate in the European Union. Even though it is clear that persistent unemployment requires bold measures so as to engage young educated Greeks in the labour market, there is no coherent policy at present targeting that population group, especially university students. This paper explores university student internship as a new labour market institution that has the potential of enhancing youth employability in Greece.

Design/methodology/approach – In order to answer the main research questions, an explorative case study methodology was chosen. This paper was based on a series of semi-structured face-to-face interviews whose aim was to explore student perceptions of the effects of a current co-operative education programme launched by the University of Macedonia in Greece.

Findings – The findings of the empirical research indicate that co-operative education can be used as a vehicle for linking theoretical knowledge and practice, and enhancing student employability upon graduation.

Research limitations/implications – This is an exploratory study that seeks to analyse a limited number of internships within a university. A large-scale national survey involving students from various academic disciplines and other universities would result in a more comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of internships in Greece.

Practical implications – This study has shown that a work-study programme promoting work opportunities for Greek youth seems to have great value for student employability.

Originality/value – Given the dearth of empirical research on youth unemployment in Greece, this study contributes to debates in the wider academic community on the issue of how to formulate and implement active labour market policies for young, well-educated Greeks.

Keywords Career development, Greece, Universities, Students, Unemployment

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Unemployment among college graduates is a main issue within the Greek economy and society. If students are to meet the skill requirements of an ever-changing labour market, adequate resources need to be invested in appropriate forms of work experience and in building up transferable skills. On the demand side, Greek firms are faced with the challenges posed by an increasingly competitive market environment within the European Monetary Union (Spanos *et al.*, 2001). Due to intense competition from the EMU membership, Greece has had to shift from its traditional small proprietor's patron model of management to one of modern style of management (Makridakis *et al.*, 1997). This has forced companies to now rely heavily on attracting and retaining college graduates with the right skills (Papalexandris and Chalikias, 2002).

It has been only very recently that the Greek government and universities alike have turned to co-operative education programmes to prepare undergraduates for the complex world of labour. Placing students in Greek firms via internships can enhance



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active labour market policy by improving graduates' prospects in the labour market. In fact, taking advantage of systematic funding from the European Union, the Greek Ministry of Education has launched a co-operative education programme aimed at assisting undergraduates in developing employment skills as well as attaining career related work experience. This national, centrally funded project started in 1997 and is now running its second phase seeking to enhance employability of university students by fostering partnerships between universities and firms ranging from two to six months.

Within this framework, the University of Macedonia, School of Economic and Social Sciences, located in northern Greece, offers students who major mostly in business administration, economics, finance and applied informatics, work placements in various local companies. Participating employers are not required to pay their interns, but they must meet university requirements. For instance, the university tries to provide senior accounting majors with hands-on, professional accounting experience, not simple clerical work, although career office personnel understand that these tasks may be necessary in any job. In any case, interns can turn to a university faculty member who supervises his/her progress, in order to resolve any dispute that may arise between a working student and an employer.

This paper considers the experience of placing fourth year business students in various enterprises, both well-established corporations and small-sized firms. The survey, based on in-depth interviews with 11 interns provides an evaluation of a typical work-based academic driven internship that has been running over the last few years at Greek universities and has been co-funded by the EU and the Greek Ministry of Education.

The article begins by discussing the role of university internships. It then outlines the explorative case study methodology that was carried out. In the findings section, the paper tries to assess the nature and value of the on-going co-operative programme based on the analysis of the case and background information available from the interviews. The policy implications are discussed in the conclusion.

The role of university internships

Academic driven internships organize and promote the placement of students in private enterprises and other organizations to foster the work experience so that students will attain the necessary skills to supplement their theoretical training. While students are still at university, internships can help them develop a core of global market skills that are now considered requirements, such as communication and time management skills, better self-confidence and better self-motivation (Gill and Lashine, 2003; Dennis, 1996). Work experience through co-operative programmes provides credible means for softening the reality shock of transitioning from the world of academics to the working world. (Garavan and Murphy, 2001; Collin and Tynjalla, 2003). In fact, internships improve job opportunities for students since it allows them to hone their job skills and work values, focus on their career choices, directly access job sources, even to impress potential employers. As a result, students who have internships tend to find jobs more quickly upon graduation than students who did not have internships (Knouse *et al.*, 1999).

Participating firms gain from student employment as well. Student placements represent flexible, high quality labour as supplementary human resources to a growing

service sector across the advanced economies (Curtis and Lucas, 2001). Equally important, companies, especially small ones, are keen to offer internships as a credible means to ensure a steady stream of well-educated, talented employees (Ellis, 2000; Brindley and Ritchie, 2000; Callanan and Benzing, 2004). Hence, internship placements can assist partner companies in being more efficient in retaining qualified employees and enhancing their performance.

In analyzing university internships, the general assumption is that the modern knowledge economy requires a leap in graduates' skills and educational institutions try to implement innovative reforms to provide their students with skills needed by "high performance" firms. This assumption used in the present study seems employable within the framework of wage labor relations. It might not be so useful if one extends his analysis beyond the realm of paid work. In fact, Livingstone (1998) analyzing work organization from a systemic point of view has criticized the skill scarcity thesis. Instead, he concluded that there is a surplus work-related knowledge and the underutilization of this knowledge is a systemic component of the dominant shareholder model of work organization that is confined only to paid work.

Aim of the study

Having mentioned above the dearth of information concerning the main dimensions of the co-operative education programme at Greek universities, the present study tries to provide some insights on the socialization process and the effectiveness of the current academic driven internships. Hence, the aim of this paper is to assess these work-based learning projects from the point of view of the interns. The following research questions were addressed:

- How do students perceive and assess their learning experience in the workplace for their career development while attending university?
- What do students expect in terms of skill acquisition prior to any engagement with a company, and what are their perceived relevant benefits at the conclusion of the work-based programme?
- What are the main weaknesses of the current co-operative education programme as perceived by the interns, and consequently what are their suggestions for improvement?

Research method

In order to answer the research questions, an explorative case study methodology was chosen. This research method is preferred when "why" and "how" questions are being posed. In contrast to the quantitative approach, this study uses more subtle methods to uncover the detail of students' work experiences and provide insights into the dynamics and processes involved in work-based learning. After all, only qualitative analysis based on in-depth interviews with open-ended questions can capture the emotional experiences of undergraduates participating in internships (Greenbank, 2002; Garavan and Murphy, 2001). Indeed, this paper was based on a series of semi-structured face-to-face interviews that aimed to explore student perceptions of the effects of a current co-operative education programme. This programme was an internship project co-funded by the EU and the Greek Ministry of Education and launched by the career center of the University of Macedonia, placing students with firms located in the city of Thessaloniki.

In order to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings drawn from the open discussion with participants, quantitative methods were limited to the issue of interns' skill acquisition (Shipper, 1999; Baruch and Leeming, 2001; Baruch and Peiperl, 2000). Hence, in the structured part of the questionnaire, using a Likert-type of scale (1 – not at all to 7 – extremely high), respondents were asked to assess their perceived level of certain skills before and after their internship.

A total of 11 interns participated in face-to-face interviews following their engagement with the employing firms. The author was the supervisor of these students' internships appointed by the career center at the academic institution. The participants were all seniors in the Business Management course who worked in various firms, ranging from large-sized banks to micro-businesses. Students were all employed in service sector enterprises, working on a full-time basis during their term-time, and their internships lasted either two or three months. Students' payment was symbolic, ranging from €118 to €132 per month, funded solely by the academic institution. Employer participation in student payment was optional. Students 1 (S1) and 2 (S2) were employed in two different banks, student 3 (S3) in an advertising company of eight employees, student 4 (S4) in an internet provider employing 12 people, student 5 (S5) in an internet café franchising company employing 75 people, student 6 (S6) in a coffee trading company employing 23 people, student 7 (S7) in a micro-business trading medical products and appliances. Students 8, 9 and 10 were placed with small-sized local corporate consulting firms. Finally, student 11 was placed in a relatively new small private bank distinct for its corporate culture and organizational practices that has set it apart from the two large state-owned banks participating in the co-operative education programme.

The interviews were conducted in May 2004, lasting approximately 75 minutes, utilizing an interview protocol that addressed all research questions that underpinned this study. Hence, the interview protocol was divided into three sections. In the first section, entitled the work-based learning process, respondents were asked to assess their work experience throughout the different phases of their internship. In the second section, entitled skill acquisition and career prospects, interns were asked to explain whether and how the internship helped them to improve their academic, enterprise and personal skills. In the last section, entitled weaknesses and suggestions for improvement, students first were asked to pinpoint the main weaknesses of the internship and then to spell out the most appropriate potential measures for improving the on-going co-operative programme.

Special care was taken to maintain the appropriate levels of confidentiality. This was accomplished by the use of pseudonyms and by limiting any information that could be used to identify the intern. The interview data were transcribed, codified and subsequently analysed. The result of this analysis is presented in the following section.

Findings

The work-based learning process

Evaluating the recruitment process. The academic institution plays a pivotal role in the recruitment stage. It offers a list of participating firms from which the student must choose. The standard procedure is that the student provides a curriculum vitae and completes an application form, specifying three organizations in which she/he would prefer to get a job. Based on the student's curriculum vitae, employers arrange an

interview through the career office with certain applicants seeking a person-organisation fit. After the interviews, jobs are usually offered to the majority of applicants.

Amidst a high unemployment environment, all interviewees expressed low expectations in finding a job, feeling lucky and happy that the career office at the University of Macedonia found them a work placement. At the entry stage of their work experience, students received no information about the job positions available except monthly compensation, since there was no means to preview jobs offered by the career office. Only during the interview with their potential employers did eight out of the 11 respondents have a good chance to try to match their preferences to those of a particular firm, and in fact they did so with considerable success. The other two students (S1 and S2), had no clue about their prospective employers, since they were selected by two semi-state banks based solely on their résumés, without having a chance for an interview.

By contrast, all of the small sized firms, eager to utilize the flexible, cheap labour of talented young people, used comprehensive interviews to inform applicants about organization priorities and provide them with specific job descriptions. Student 4 was a typical example of the above. She had not heard of the company, and the career center had no knowledge of it since it was new on the corporate list. However, the job interview was extremely informative. As the student herself described, the co-owner of a small firm that provides internet services:

... devoted plenty of time to clarify his expectations about the job I was expected to perform. It was a door-to-door sales job and he gave me all the information so I would be able to join the firm's sales force right away. He offered me as an incentive €200 per month and 10 per cent on my sales as an extra pay. The whole interview was a pretty enlightening and exciting process, giving me a very realistic job preview.

Therefore, one could reach the conclusion that the current co-operative programme lacks the necessary mechanisms to prepare students for the entry process. Nevertheless, labour market forces tend to ameliorate this weakness, as in the case of small firms participating in the internship programme. Indeed, there is an army of small-sized company proprietors eager to inform thoroughly their interns and then employ well-educated young people as versatile and low-paid employees.

Evaluating the entry process: job induction, supervising and training. Even though most of the interns have a sound academic background, training ensures students are equipped with working knowledge to cope with their specific job role. Personnel at the work site gave interns an individual induction, which lasted between three days and two weeks. The induction process, introducing students to their supervisors and key personnel, aims to alleviate anxiety and facilitate adaptation to company culture and a new value system.

The respondents were asked to indicate if the induction process and the training that followed were sufficient enough for a fruitful work experience. Nine out of 11 students greatly valued the induction process, their close co-operation with their supervisors, and their informal training, which was focused on their job. Therefore the induction process was typically specific to the site and varied in length and content. For instance, Student 6 working as an assistant accountant needed just one week to become familiar with the company's accounting software. After that, supervising

became very informal and actually this intern was checked by her overall performance and job results. In contrast, Student 7, promoting medical equipment through personal sales, had to discuss extensively his daily customer contacts with his supervisor-business proprietor every evening. As he commented:

Close supervising and lasting training is not a problem, because the daily discussions with the boss reveal the loopholes of this tricky business that no textbook can teach you.

Student 8 was the exception to a positively perceived entry process employed at a relatively small consulting company, where, as she states:

I found a chaotic corporate environment in which businesses were booming at that particular time and people expected me to catch up with the experienced personnel almost immediately. Instead, facing this awkward situation I felt alienated.

Similarly, Student 2, working for a state-owned bank, experienced a rough induction process. She commented that:

It took me a lot of energy and time to build up working relations with my supervisor. In fact, the first two weeks I was making coffees, photocopies and personal favors for the standard personnel of my department. I felt that this situation was undermining my personality and I asked my University's career office to intervene. To my surprise, they told me that I should be grateful I had a job and should not complain.

By contrast, Student 11 working at the private bank, having experienced a very well organized induction to the job, and intense on-the-job training, started serving customers from the third day on.

Almost all the interviewed students stressed that individual job induction was sound and on-site training was robust and systematic. The sooner interns can provide their services, the better for the employing firms, therefore it is not surprising at all that employers try hard to facilitate students' entry and socialization process. The only exceptions to this were a state-owned bank and a consulting firm, both failing to provide interns with a professionally organized entry process. In the former case, one could assume that this highly bureaucratic organization participates solely in the co-operative education programme to maintain its corporate image to the public, while it is widely known that it faces personnel redundancies. In the latter case, the firm could not handle the student's entry process in the midst of surging demand.

Completing the internship: catching up with students' expectations? Crucial to this survey was the issue of students' expectations from their co-operative education placements. The first research issue was to explore how students perceived the linkage between university studies, work-based knowledge and work performance.

First, the interviewees were asked to respond if they put greater value on their college-based learning experience or on the practical competencies acquired through specific work experience. All of the participating students had a clear-cut position on this issue and they put it in a very simple way: theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge are complementary processes. Their comments were almost identical converging to the main argument that school-based learning provides the theoretical groundwork but at paid work one must acquire additional knowledge, competencies and skills to perform specific job tasks. They insist that integrating theoretical knowledge and work experience was the only way to enhance their employability as

graduates. That was the only reason, as they mentioned, for which they were ready to accept the humiliating monthly payment of €132 for a full-time job.

Second, the interviewees were asked to relate theoretical knowledge and work performance. Students' perceptions of the relevance between coursework and work performance were dependent on the particular job positions. For instance, student 6, working as an assistant accountant, commented:

... that after taking numerous accounting courses at the university and becoming familiar with firm's accounting software my job was very easy for me. In the first weeks it was fascinating to apply all the accounting I learnt in the classroom in a real company. In the last weeks of the co-operative programme, I got bored a little bit with accounting and I wanted to rotate to the sales department (importing-exporting coffee products) but they kept using my accounting skills up to the end of the internship.

Some other interns thought that their theoretical background provided a valuable, although limited, basis for coping with their work tasks. A typical example is student 7, promoting medical products through personal sales. He commented that: "few marketing courses gave me an idea about personal sales, but it had not been much help when I contacted physiotherapists and tried to exhibit my company's products at their own sites."

Skill acquisition and career prospects

The second main issue explored in this study was what students expected in terms of skill acquisition prior to any engagement with a company, and what were the relevant benefits at the conclusion of their internship. Here, the findings are quite encouraging in most cases. In terms of skills development, placement work experience turned out to be considered extremely important by students who completed their internships. Most of the students had never before encountered a commercial environment; therefore they had a vague notion of expected skill development entering the employing company. Actually, they had an array of low expectations, shaped by peers' rumors about irrelevant work assignments to their own study areas, with intensifying working conditions and humiliating payment. With the exception of the latter, that was known to the students from the beginning, rumors pertinent to working conditions and especially job content and skill development turned out to be false. In any case, in terms of expectations, the common ground remained the prospect that completing the internship would enhance students' chances of finding a job after graduation.

Having completed their internships, though, the interviewees were more optimistic about their career prospects. Their optimism was based upon skill enhancement reported in ten out of eleven internships. In fact, the analysis of the interviews led to the main conclusion that students considered that their personal skills had been well developed by their internships, with a corresponding improvement in their employability as graduates.

Specifically, respondents perceived that they had considerably increased their academic and enterprise skills. In order to cross-check the positive impact of the internship on skills that emerged from the open discussion, students were asked to reply to the structured part of the questionnaire. This part of the questionnaire consisted of a list of 22 areas of skills which in turn were divided into three main categories of skills: academic, enterprise, and personal development skills (Murray and

Robinson, 2001, p. 142). The academic skills category included, among other things, spoken and written communication, computer literacy, research skills, specialist knowledge and ability to apply knowledge. The personal development category consisted of qualities such as self-confidence, independence, creativity, and desire to go on learning. The enterprise category was composed of abilities such as working in a team, prioritizing tasks, and managing time. The students were invited to rate their level of competency on all the items of the list of skills that they mastered before and after the internship, in order to proxy the perceived impact. Thus the study assessed through a seven-point Lickert scale the skill areas on which the internship had the highest impact. As was expected, the data drawn from the quantitative part of the research duplicated the conclusions drawn from lengthy discussions about skill enhancement. Indeed, it was verified that internships had the greatest impact on academic and enterprise skills. According to the ratings given by the students, the most important benefits were accrued in the following areas of skills:

- Specialist knowledge.
- Information technology.
- Time management.
- Communication skills.
- Ability to prioritize tasks.
- Team work.

Quite expectedly, students had the chance to acquire specialist knowledge and sharpen their computer skills at the workplace. Moreover, they were able to improve skills in areas in which the secondary and the higher educational systems in Greece are utterly failing. Very loosely monitored assignment deadlines, and coursework requiring from the individual student to memorize a great deal of information without encouraging teamwork and open dialogue in the classroom leave future graduates totally unprepared to encounter the world of work.

Besides skill formation and enhancement, the open discussion with the interviewees provided valuable information about standard employment prospects upon graduation. Analysis of information on skills and career prospects laid the basis for an overall assessment of the current internship initiative. Table I presents an overall assessment of the co-operative education programme by outlining students' work experience in terms of skills development and career prospects.

What is obvious by observing Table I is that the vast majority of students reported positive internship experiences, exceeding in most cases their own aspirations about work-based knowledge and career prospects. The central conclusion drawn from the qualitative analysis is that the interns in general achieved their main aims, namely to gain specialist knowledge and enhance key skills such as communication, time-management skills, teamwork and the ability to prioritize tasks. This in turn strengthened their confidence in the world of work and their employability.

Moreover, such positive prospects are not based solely on student perceptions but also on standard employment contracts offered by employers to interns upon graduation. In fact, seven out of nine internships in the private sector led to job

Table I.
The impact of the
internship perceived by
students

Interns	Aspirations	Skills development	Internship assessment	Career prospects
S1	Career in the banking sector. Internship in a large bank to build on her specialist knowledge. Very shy, so she needs to socialize with corporate people	Broadening knowledge of financial practices and products. Enhanced communication and presentation skills	Unexpectedly, very positive	Enhanced chances to find a job in the banking sector
S2	She had prior work experience with two small firms. Need to work with a large, well-organized company	Highly bureaucratic bank environment gave low opportunity to develop new skills. Enhanced teamwork	Unexpectedly, negative in building up specialist knowledge. Loss of valuable study time	No better prospects after a few months of unproductive work.
S3	Need to understand how the advertising business really works	Valuable knowledge on advertising practices applied in the market. Sharpened time management and IT skills	Unexpectedly, very positive in building up my self-confidence	Continuing to work on a part time basis. Employer's proposal for a full-time job position after graduation
S4	Working on personal sales and testing her communication competencies	Promoting internet services increased her IT and presentation skills	Very positive in reassuring her communication skills. She is definitely in the sales business	Formal proposal for a standard job position in sales after graduation
S5	Acquiring working experience in the world of paid labour	Serving customers at an internet café enhanced IT knowledge	Modestly positive. Firm did not provide incentives to employees.	Proposal for work after graduation, though not appealing
S6	Applying accounting methods. Becoming a true professional	Increasing specialist knowledge of accounting. Enhanced time management and prioritizing tasks	Very positive, but no chances to engage in trading activities of the business	Reasonably high prospects for an assistant accountant position upon graduation
S7	Promoting medical equipment would sharpen personal sales skills and improve employability	Boosting my specialist knowledge on personal sales, reassuring communication skills and improving self-confidence	Unexpectedly, thrilling and highly productive work-based learning	Proposal for a standard job position in personal sales upon graduation
S8	Working with a consulting company, high expectations for specialist knowledge	Developing modestly time management and IT skills	Relatively poor experience, with working time underutilized in secretarial assignments	This internship perceived as not particularly helpful.

(continued)

Interns	Aspirations	Skills development	Internship assessment	Career prospects
S9	Having rich work experience as a sales person tried to acquire specialist knowledge with a small consulting company Seeking specialist knowledge in company consulting and some work experience	Sharpening IT and research skills	Rich experience boosting self-confidence in a new activity area for this intern	Employer's proposal for a standard job position in consulting upon graduation
S10	Working with a private new bank to acquire specialist knowledge on banking business. Improving employability	Improving critical analysis, IT and research skills, time management and ability to prioritize tasks Tremendous increase in specialist knowledge in new banking services. Enhancing communication skills, time management and ability to prioritize tasks	Very valuable and challenging learning process for a student having no working experience. An exciting working experience, which led to an extension of the internship and transformed an inexperienced student to a bank employee in a very competitive working environment	Proposal for co-operation with the company as an associate consultant Very positive prospects. Bank offered a six-month contract leading to a standard job position before graduation
S11				

Table I.

openings. One must exclude state-owned organizations, such as the two banks participating in the co-operative programme, because they are obliged by law to recruit new personnel through a nation-wide selection process. Acknowledging the fact that there is a small sample here, still one can not help but be astonished by the 78 per cent rehiring rate in the private sector which was a result of the internship programme. This seems to verify that organizations tend to value students' knowledge, competencies and potential.

Weaknesses and suggestions for improvement

However, the situation could be much more positive. In fact, the overall value added to this work-based learning experience is constrained by a series of structural limitations, inherent to the co-operative education programme under consideration. First, all the 11 interviewees reported that the brief length of their internship, ranging from two to three months, puts a lot of pressure on the intern and at the same time discourages the corporate commitment to the particular internship. Students revealed that a training period of four to six months is required for one to become productive and useful to their employers. Hence, an internship period ranging from six to 12 months would benefit both students and employing firms. In this case, they thought that the skills development process could accelerate and their employers would have ample time to evaluate them as perspective employees. Under these circumstances, the university career office could strike a better deal with companies requiring them to contribute systematically to the students' reward, raising thus total pay and making more appealing the internship to undergraduates.

The work commitment of a full-time job during term time appears to be another serious weakness of the current co-operative programme. Empirical studies in the UK have found that even part-time work in combination with class assignments might result in feelings of pressure and a sense of being pulled in two directions (Watts and Pickering, 2000; Curtis and Williams, 2002). Hence, it was not surprising that all the interviewees in this study commented that working on a full-time basis was practically incompatible with their university studies. Most of them suggested that part-time work should be the norm for the new internships so as to avoid conflict of interests between paid work and coursework. When they were asked why they accepted work on a full-time basis, they revealed that in that case they valued the work experience and thought it was worth the sacrifice. However, in the two internships where the results were not so positive, the students stressed the negative impact of full-time employment on their studies.

Conclusion

The main aim of this paper was to investigate undergraduates' perceptions of the newly established institution of co-operative education programmes in enhancing students' employability as graduates in Greece. This empirical study was based on in-depth interviews with 11 students who completed their internships. This qualitative approach was the only method that would allow the researcher to analyse perceptions, insights and feelings of the students, the protagonists of this work-based learning process.

An important dimension to this study was to explore the students' driving motive to engage in internships during term-time. The students' need to enter the world of work

and operate in practical environments was assessed as the main priority of the interviewees. They acknowledged that this co-operative education programme was a valuable way to acquire a broad competence where theoretical studies with practical knowledge support and fuse with each other. The uniqueness of the work experience as the driving force behind doing the internship gains strength from the fact that the financial benefits of the internship in most cases were minimal, almost symbolic.

The first research issue of this study was to assess this co-operative programme as a work-based learning experience. Towards this purpose the students' expectations in terms of skill acquisition were compared to what were the relevant benefits at the conclusion of their internships. The survey findings suggest that the participants, in their vast majority, perceive key skills such as time management, communication skills, teamwork, ability to prioritize tasks and specialist knowledge as having been greatly enhanced by their work experience. In that respect, the benefits of work-based learning exceeded expectations by far.

The second research issue of this paper was to provide an overall assessment of the current internship programme. Even though students reported a lack of information concerning employing firms during the contact phase, they acknowledged that the entry phase, including socialization and training, was relatively smooth and productive. Besides building up employability skills beyond expectations, the main weaknesses of the co-operative programme surfaced. Limited to a three month work time period, low pay, coupled with long working hours were among the main obstacles encountered by all the interns. But ultimately, the most important result of the college internship should be better job opportunities for participating students. Interns' comments on their prospects in the graduate labour market were very encouraging. Nine of the 11 respondents interviewed felt that practical field experience made them more marketable as "ready to work" employees. Most importantly, students' positive feelings and perceptions were backed up by measurable employability enhancement. Indeed, in seven out of nine internships in the private sector there have been reported job openings upon graduation by the host organizations.

Overall, the current co-operative education programme appears to have been successful. Structural weaknesses of the programme related to limited length of time, low student pay, and long working hours can be adjusted to students' needs to combine studies with paid work. Students valued greatly the prospect of a modified internship program lasting six to nine months, an increase in payment up to the low-minimum wage level, and work on a part-time basis. The Greek universities can achieve these adjustments only with approval and consensus from the central government. If this is not possible, the best alternative option could lie in an accreditation of degree coursework to encounter the discouraging time dimensions of the programme. Expanding the length of the internship would provide incentives to the host companies to raise pay given interns' accelerating productivity after the first few months.

In addition, the programme could become more attractive among undergraduates if universities participate as employing organizations themselves adopting similar practices of North American colleges (Mihail, 2005; Mihail and Karaliopoulou, 2005). Indeed, academic departments and other university services that are successful in securing a funded internship programme could actively choose among the most capable students as a supplementary workforce in improving services.

There are some limitations of the present study. Given the lack of empirical research on Greek university internships, this paper was primarily exploratory for the Greek case. Any further conclusions drawn from this research must be considered tentative as it was based on a small, self-selecting, sample of interns taken solely from a business degree programme at one university. There may be important differences between business and non-business undergraduates, and different universities. It is important for future research to incorporate a wider range of undergraduates and academic institutions to ascertain that the favourable outcomes of internships found in this study apply to a more heterogeneous student population. The subjects in this study were strictly students. Further research should include more information on other stakeholders in this process, namely employing companies and university career office managers. These additional insights seem crucial if government, universities and participating companies are to adjust the current internship programmes to better meet the work-based learning and career management needs of Greek students.

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