



Student Transitions: Example of transitions practice

Title:

Third Sector Internships Scotland (TSIS): Developing work-based learning opportunities to enhance the employability of Scotland's university students

Transition(s) the practice supports:

TSIS supported students in transitioning *through* Higher Education by providing meaningful work-based learning experiences and *out of* Higher Education by developing and improving employability skills.

Abstract:

Third Sector Internships Scotland offered students from all Scottish universities the opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to charities, social enterprises and voluntary organisations through completing paid, supported internships. It was a unique example of HEIs working in partnership with each other and with third sector groups to enhance student employability, creating nationwide impact and local level change. Each internship had its own story of success, achievement and impact for the intern, the organisation and communities across Scotland. Across the board, employers and interns reported an increase in confidence and an increase in their capacity to act and take plans forward.

Description:

The Third Sector Internships Scotland (TSIS) programme, led by the Open University in Scotland, Queen Margaret University, and Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations ran between 2010 and 2015. The initiative was supported by the Scottish Funding Council through the *Learning to Work 2* workstream. During this period, the programme received 8314 applications for 349 paid internships. Applications were submitted by students at every HEI in Scotland, resulting in 1275 interviews, with bespoke feedback offered to all interviewees. Through the TSIS programme, students were offered outstanding opportunities to develop their skills and experience whilst contributing to the vital work of Scotland's third sector. Support and guidance was also offered to voluntary organisations, charities and social enterprises to help them develop and host quality internships that really did make a difference. Each internship has its own particular story of success and impact, for intern, organisation and broader community, best illustrated through [individual case studies](#). Clear themes have, however, emerged:

- Organisations are widely supportive of the internship model, seeing it as bringing fresh perspective to the organisation, offering a focused, output-oriented injection of support to get a specific task done.

- The posts are recognised as clearly distinct from volunteer opportunities, given the focus on delivering a project within a tight time frame.
- There is evidence of organisations' interest in retaining interns in some capacity (as volunteers, paid employees and consultants) and in taking on further interns.
- Employer feedback was very positive about the quality of applicants, the work undertaken by the interns, and the support provided by the project.
- Employers were particularly appreciative of the recruitment support provided by TSIS and the 'brokerage' role the programme played in opening access to students from all Scottish universities.
- Student feedback was overwhelmingly positive with benefits in terms of skills development, engagement and understanding of the third sector. Students also reported feeling more strongly connected to the local community and making a contribution to Scottish society as a result of completing an internship.

For an overview of TSIS, view the following video: [Third Sector Internships Scotland: Work Experience that Makes a Difference.](#)

Reflections

Over the five years of the programme a number of key themes emerged that have implications for how we understand internships and work placements and how universities can maximise the benefits of such opportunities. We offer here an overview of these themes and highlight points for consideration and action by those seeking to develop initiatives similar to TSIS. Specifically, the TSIS programme offers insights into five thematic areas and introduces practice points of particular note to others wishing to develop a similar initiative.

1. Why Internships? Understanding Student Motivations

Over the past five years considerable focus has been directed to the role of internships as mechanisms for gaining work experience and securing routes to permanent jobs. Internships are increasingly common across a range of sectors, from those with a long history of such positions (creative industries and the legal professions, for example) to those, including the third sector, where the term has been less common. Yet internships have also increased in their notoriety for being unpaid, leading to accusations of a 'new elitism' where only those who can afford to work for free can gain the experience necessary to access certain professions.

Key Learning and Action Points

- Internships are seen as a distinct type of work experience, combining real work and real responsibility with a strong focus on supported development of the intern.
- Students see such roles as having particular value and currency in the labour market, distinct from volunteering and other work experience.
- Internships were particularly welcomed as a new route in to a third sector career, making this career pathway a clear professional choice.
- Ensuring internships are paid and appropriately supported is key: Students are well aware of existence of 'bad' and exploitative unpaid internships.
- Universities should ensure they maintain high standards in the internships they offer directly and allow to be advertised via their careers services and other channels.

2. Making Internships Meaningful

TSIS placed considerable emphasis on the need for internships to be meaningful both for interns and host organisations. This meant developing intern roles that were distinct and well-defined, and which allowed the intern to take responsibility for a stand-alone piece of work. Students reported that TSIS internships led them to increase their skills and confidence as a result of the high levels of ownership they were given during their internships. Employers noted that projects were of real benefit to them and they were able to get substantial pieces of work done that could not have been achieved through other means.

Key Learning and Advice

- Internship initiatives should not just focus on the few who 'get the job' but consider how to enhance the employability of applicants. A supported recruitment process, with appropriate feedback and guidance, is key to this.
- Input at the role development stage is critical if internships are to be genuinely beneficial and rewarding for student and host organisation. It is particularly critical to spend sufficient time refining and tailoring the job description prior to advertising.
- A cross-sector, Scotland-wide approach to recognising experience could be beneficial. If the hub and spoke model for extending internship opportunities proposed by TSIS and re-emphasised in the SFC/Rocket Science evaluation report is developed, this should be accompanied by a recognised 'badge' or other form of accreditation.

3. Ensuring Effective Employer Engagement

Through the TSIS project it became evident that efforts aimed at supporting student employability must also consider how best to support employers. Host organisations need support and assistance if they are to be enabled to offer appropriate opportunities to students and to understand the benefits that students and graduates could potentially bring to their organisation. Universities may be well placed to provide this support.

Key Learning and Advice

- Employer engagement is more than inviting employers to participate in any given programme.
- Many organisations will require support, guidance and practical assistance if they are to gain the confidence and skills to support a student to work with them. This is particularly relevant to small and micro organisations such as those TSIS worked with.
- Internships can be a useful and mutually beneficial first step for university-employer engagement and a very practical pathway for enhancing knowledge exchange activity.
- Practical assistance, with recruitment and student support, is particularly appreciated.
- Universities need to appreciate the importance of this and the skills that they have in this area that could benefit the host and, by extension, student interns.
- Employers may not be able to provide financial support for intern salaries. Exploring statutory or charitable funding sources may be necessary. In addition, this is likely to require a 'joined up' approach to funding, emphasising educational benefits and the broader social, economic and cultural benefits that accrue to communities across Scotland from internships such as those provided by TSIS.

4. Making Internships Legal and Ethical

In the early years of the TSIS programme, there was considerable popular and political discussion around internships. While the TSIS programme had adopted the term to differentiate their offer from module-aligned work-placements, it was clear that the term was being used in multiple ways across a range of sectors.

Key Learning and Advice

- Internships are not a legally distinct category of work and must be seen in light of broader employment legislation.
- We would encourage universities to consider paying Living Wage to interns and emphasising the importance of fair pay and working conditions in the development of programmes of internships that sit outside credit bearing courses of study.
- Students are acutely aware of the challenges of juggling (wage-earning) work, study and other commitments. Paid internships offer routes to gain meaningful work experience whilst still earning money.

5. Supporting Reflection and Skills Articulation

The discourse of graduate attributes has gained considerable currency in recent years and many universities across Scotland have sought to define what these are in relation to their own graduates and then to embed these within the curriculum. Yet what is often given less attention in discussions is an exploration of how these attributes translate from the university curriculum into practice in the world of employment, voluntary work and beyond. The TSIS programme provided an opportunity to explore (a) how students articulate their skills and experience and (b) to consider how to better support them to do so.

Key Learning and Advice

- Students need assistance and support to articulate and apply their university learning and experience in specific work contexts. Building in real world projects and recruitment experience to internships and other work experience is critically important.
- Taking students out of their comfort zone may help them think more reflectively and critically on their experience. In addition to written reflection, other methods to promote articulation of skills and experience may be beneficial.

The TSIS programme leaves a strong legacy in terms of skilled and confident graduates now working in Scotland's third sector, organisations open to collaboration with universities, and cross sector commitment to ethical, paid and fairly accessible internships. It also leaves practical guides to how to make high quality internships workable, with step-by-step practice guides and a blueprint for cross-sector, multi-institutional collaboration.

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