

# In-company traineeships as a channel of Business and Economics students' employment

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## **Background information and relation to previous literature**

Youth graduates' unemployment is a paramount problem in Europe, especially in southern countries. Several moves have been made recently to try to mitigate this problem at a political level, and solutions have been proposed including the promotion of in-company traineeships.

In many previous studies concerning the job insertion of graduates, work experience gained with traineeships stands in the second place in order of importance for getting a job, only after recommendations via acquaintances, friends and families, and there is a trend for traineeships to grow in importance.

It is reasonable to expect that an efficient internship system will contribute to improve graduates' employability and therefore alleviate the youth unemployment problem. This opinion has been supported by Knouse and Fontenot (2008), who have reviewed an important number of scientific works that confirm this expectation in the area of business studies.

On the other hand, the introduction of the EHEA has had an impact on the internships, not only because they are part of the curricula but also because the students have understood that this is a channel of labour insertion (Tymon, 2011). Therefore our objective is to assess the point of view of the involved agents, students and tutors, regarding the changes that have been introduced in the internships to improve the employability of graduates.

## **Theoretical approach and methodology**

The focus in this research is on how students acquire the knowledge and skills that will allow them to enter the labour market through the practical activities in traineeships. The theory of constructivism (Kolb, 1984) explains the continuous process of knowledge and learning based on individual experiences and interactions with the environment.

To achieve our goal we have conducted a survey to the first EHEA graduates of Business and Economics students in our university, as well as to the companies' tutors. Among other items we wanted to find the answers to the following questions:

1. What are the characteristics of the students who get a traineeship extension offer or a labour contract? Are there gender differences and differences by degrees?
2. What is the relationship between the motivation level of students and the offer of an extension or a contract? Are there gender differences and differences by degrees?
3. What are the characteristics of the companies which offered a traineeship extension or a labour contract?
4. What is the opinion of the companies' tutors which have offered a labour contract or a traineeship extension?
5. What is the opinion of the students who have received an offer (labour contract or traineeship extension) in relationship to the traineeship?

The questions in the survey were based on works investigating education in the workplace (Tynjälä, 2008, Virtanen, 2012) and connective models between learning and practice (Griffiths and Guile, 2003, and Guile and Griffiths, 2001).

## **Preliminary results**

Based on the preliminary results of the survey we find no big gender difference between students who received a labour contract or practice extension and the others; this latter group includes students who are still doing the traineeship. The percentage of female students is, however, appreciably larger in the extensions than in labour contracts. We also found that the Business Administration students received more offers than the students in the other degrees.

Almost 90% of the students who received a proposal for continuation, either internship extension or labour contract, indicated they felt very motivated in doing the practices well. And more than 30% of the students who did not receive the proposal, indicated that they were fairly satisfied with their personal motivation.

Regarding the typology of companies we distinguished four types: multinationals and very large companies, large companies, medium, and small or familiar enterprises. As one of the more relevant aspects we find that the small companies, in percentages, were more proactive in offering continuity proposals: more than 50% of students who went to these companies had a proposal when they finished the traineeship. In absolute numbers, the large companies or multinationals offered the majority of proposals.

The companies tutors made a positive assessment of the students' activity, but only a few of them answered this item. The correlation between the knowledge acquired by students and the tutors valuation of the students work shows that the tutors value the internship when students are able to absorb knowledge and capacities. This is a remarkable skill, as firms value more the students that are able to adapt and learn in all situations. However, one of them found that there was a lack of a specific technological skill.

In general, few students expressed an opinion in the final open question of the questionnaire, only those very satisfied or very unsatisfied answered this question. We found a very clear relationship between the offer for continuity and the orientations of the opinions. There are more negative opinions among those who did not receive an offer, especially in aspects related to the organization of the traineeship and the preliminary information. Among the students who received an offer, the answers to this item were very positive, for example one student wrote:

*"I think everybody should have an experience in a real company or institution before finishing their degree. It has been the best of what I did during my studies"*

### **Implications of the study**

We expect that this work will contribute to:

1. Promote the collaboration between the academic world and the companies in order to increase mutual knowledge. On one hand, the students have to be prepared for the transition to their future professional activities, and on the other hand, the employers have to be aware of the contents of the academic training, competences and skills developed by their potential employees.
2. Foster long-term relationship between academic institutions and the employers. It is necessary to consider a continuous series of interchanges and contacts for a smooth and fruitful collaboration in the long term.

In summary, the results achieved should represent a promising and interesting starting point to continue the development of this research.

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