

The challenge of entering into the international traineeships network for a South European university (0360)

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Background information

The introduction of the EHEA has had an impact in different areas of higher education, and one of these is related to traineeships or work placements. Some countries where there was little tradition of traineeships or it was restricted to a few fields of study, as was the case of Spain, have experienced a remarkable increase in the number of students doing traineeships. Another of the goals of the EHEA is to facilitate mobility of students between different countries, and this also applies to traineeships. The Erasmus+ programme is an example of the combination of mobility abroad and traineeships in companies. Deakin (2012) has performed one of the few academic studies up to date on Erasmus work placements.

The work presented here is a preliminary study aimed at assessing the impact of international traineeships in Spanish universities, and in particular in one of the latest in joining the Erasmus+ programme, Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF) of Barcelona. The deployment of post-EHEA traineeships in this university has already been studied in previous works (Alemany et al., 2014), and the main conclusions are that there is a high degree of satisfaction amongst students and tutors, although the increase in the number of trainees has caused some disarrangement in the quality of the monitoring that still has to be fixed, and also that international traineeships are still much less frequent than expected. One of the possible reasons for this is related to the context of economic crisis.

This work on international traineeships at UPF is developed in the context of a Strategic Plan that the university is deploying with the occasion of its 25th anniversary, and that has internationalisation as one of its basic pillars.

Theoretical background

In this study on traineeships, the theoretical background is based on the constructivism theory and Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Kosnik et al., 2013). The constructivism theory describes learning as a process of reelaboration of knowledge according to previous conceptions and reflection on acquired experience. The continuous process of knowledge and learning based on individual experiences and interactions with the environment is enhanced, in the case of international traineeships, with socio-cultural aspects since the student may have to adapt to a new cultural context, a new language, etc. (Deakin, 2012).

Active experimentation is complemented in a balanced way with the reflexive observation of the acquired experience. For international traineeships, reflexion is more intense because the environment is more influential.

Deakin (2012) has studied and tabulated the differences between studying abroad and doing a traineeship abroad, in several respects, including financial aspects, language barriers, and students' orientation to their future employment, also taking into account gender differences. According to her study, "work placement mobility also reinforces globalisation by

encouraging the mobility of individuals after graduation, leading to subsequent highly skilled migration of future workers”.

Three threads emerging from the state-of-the-art research on internships are identified in the current literature:

- The opportunities for soft skill development.
- Integrating theory or course work with practice.
- Preparation for employment or career aspirations.

These topics are quoted in the context of postgraduate traineeships, but in this study they will be applied to international traineeships.

Methodology

The starting point of this work is a previous study of traineeships at UPF in general. This study was based on a survey administered to trainees that contained the following types of items:

- ✓ Objective items:
 - Personal aspects of the students and companies’ data.
- ✓ Subjective items:
 - Students’ perception of the relationship between the academic knowledge and the activities done in the traineeship, and of the development of competences.
 - Student’s opinion, motivation and satisfaction about the development of the practices, and the use of ICT .
 - Student evaluation of their own work and of the traineeship.
- ✓ Contribution of the traineeship to the labour integration.
- ✓ One open question for comments on topics not covered by the previous items.

The questions in the survey were based on works investigating education in the workplace (Tynjälä, 2008, Virtanen et al., 2012), competences (Knipprath and De Rick, 2014), satisfaction level (Gault et al., 2000) and connective models between learning and practice (Griffiths and Guile, 2003, and Guile and Griffiths, 2001).

In order to investigate international mobility of trainees at UPF, an adapted questionnaire will be administered to all students and tutors that have already participated in some international traineeship, both in the Erasmus+ programme (40 students in 2015) and bilateral agreements.

With the results from this survey, a comparison will be performed in two axes. On one hand, international traineeships will be compared to local traineeships as per the previous studies at UPF. And on the other hand, these international traineeships results at UPF will be compared to available results of similar studies performed in other countries with a more consolidated tradition of international work placements.

With the results from this survey we intend to find answers to the following research questions, also in two axes. For the local-international axe the questions are:

1. To what extent the students’ developed soft skills both in the local and the international traineeships?

2. What is the relationship between the theory acquired in the academic studies and the practice developed during the internships? Is there a higher divergence in international traineeships?
3. Are the internships a preparation for a future job placement?

For the international-international axe, the research questions are:

1. How do students experience international work placements?
2. What are the outcomes of this form of mobility?
3. Are there significant differences between the outcome of international and local traineeships?

Implications of the study

The goal of the questionnaire is to find out which are the factors that contribute to a successful international traineeship. The first results are expected to be available at the beginning of the 2015-2016 academic year.

Given the scarce number of studies on work placements abroad, this work will contribute to a better understanding of the experiences of students coming from a South European university and their expectations of finding a job in a foreign country.

As Deakin (2012) points out, “the Erasmus work placement programme has the potential to transform students’ lives, and the effects of this should not be underestimated”.

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