

# Understanding the value of internships

## Research summary

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## Introduction

Internships are a staple offering within a UK business degree, and are growing in popularity across other disciplines and overseas. Internships offer crucial workplace exposure and experience prior to employment. There is evidence that graduates undertaking internships have improved academic and employment outcomes, with studies showing that interns often secure more graduate job offers, achieve higher graduate salaries, and are more satisfied in their first graduate roles. However, these patterns are not universal, with studies also showing that successful internships are a product of strong partnerships between employers, universities, and students.

Despite these findings, little is known about how and what students learn during internships, and how their learning leads to the skill and competency improvements that make these benefits possible. This research programme aims to address this gap.

## Background

Since 2016, students undertaking a 9-to-12-month industrial internship at Leeds University Business School have been invited to take part in a research programme that has looked to explore how students' goals, values, attitudes, and competencies develop during internships.

Students complete questionnaires measuring their work attitudes, values and competencies over the course of their internship. In the mid- and end- point of the internship, students' colleagues (a workplace peer, and their line manager) also complete questionnaires rating the student's competencies, providing the student with formative feedback on their progress. At each point, students write reflective essays critiquing their progress, and considering possible development opportunities for the next part of their internship.

The objectives of this research are to:

- Uncover the ways in which students' goals, values, attitudes, and competencies develop during internships.
- Understand how students perceive their proficiency and development, and how their self-perceptions compare with the ratings given by their workplace colleagues.
- Explore differences in proficiency and development across disciplines and student groups.
- Apply the research findings to improve the student experience and enable evidence-based employability provision.
- The work presented in this report summarises data from across three student cohorts (2016-2019), working within over 200 different organizations, from across three University of Leeds Faculties.

\*Sources: Taylor, 1988; Gault et al, 2000; Brooks & Youngson, 2016; Judge, Thoresen, Bono & Patton, 2001; Gault, Redington & Schlager, 2000; Velez & Giner, 2015.

## Key findings

The research shows that:



Students' competencies develop at different rates.



There are discrepancies in the ways that students and their colleagues rate their competency development during the internships.



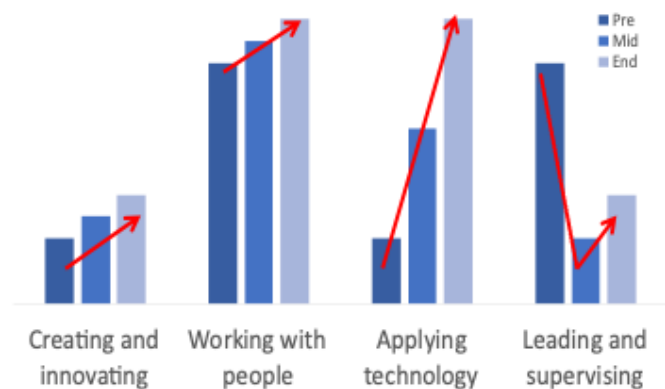
There are differences between student proficiency, and the rates at which competencies develop, depending on students' disciplines and demographic characteristics.

### What is a competency?

The ability to apply or use the knowledge, skills, and abilities that are needed to successfully perform tasks in a specific work setting.

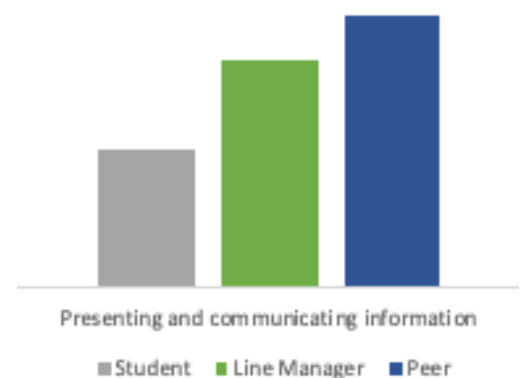
## Students' competencies develop at different rates

- Students consider their proficiency in some areas to be low before starting work, and despite their internship, progress remains small and incremental.
- In other areas, such as working with people, students' proficiency is already high, and so only improves slightly during the year.
- In other areas (e.g., applying expertise and technology) proficiency develops sharply and rapidly during their internship, reaching high levels by the end.
- Students rate their proficiency at leading and supervising higher before starting work than they do mid-internship. This suggests that they either recalibrate their proficiency once they start work, or their proficiency in this area reduces in the first half of the internship. While these levels improve by the end, they only slightly overtake pre-internship levels.



## Colleagues offer different ratings of students' competencies

- Ratings given by line managers and peers were often significantly higher than the student's own ratings, suggesting that students may under-rate their proficiency (e.g., for areas such as applying expertise and technology, presenting and communicating information, and relating and networking).
- For most competencies, the proficiency ratings offered by line managers and peers were consistent with each other.
- Students' line managers and peers were "unable to comment" on a number of competency areas, suggesting that students either do not have the opportunity to practice a full range of competencies during the internship, or that their work in these areas is not noticed by the organization.



## Competency development is affected by students' demographic characteristics

For a number of competencies, the rate of development and overall proficiency level, depended on factors such as gender and degree major. For example:

- At the start of the internship, females reported lower confidence in their ability to succeed in the internship, compared with males. By the end of the internship, female interns' confidence had overtaken that of male counterparts.
- Females reported lower proficiency levels than males throughout their internships across some competencies, including: enterprising and performing, coping with pressure and setbacks, and persuading and influencing.
- Males reported lower levels of proficiency than females throughout the internship, for competencies such as leading and supervising, and adhering to ethics and values.
- Line managers rated the proficiency of male and female students differently. In several cases these differences were in the counter direction to the ratings of students themselves: Male students rated their own performance higher than that of their female counterparts. However, for the same competencies line managers rated females' proficiency as higher than males'.



## What is the value of this research?

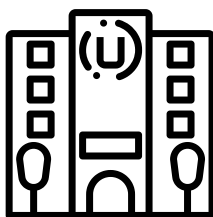


### FOR STUDENTS:

- It provides detailed, multi-layered feedback from employers about their performance.
- It provides them with data across a full range of graduate-level competencies, to encourage them to self-manage internship progress.
- It enables students to reflect deeply and holistically on their self-concept – who they are, what matters to them, where their strengths and weaknesses are.
- By asking students to reflect on nearly 100 different competencies, it forces students to think about skills that they may have previously had no reason to think about. Students often report that completing the exercise forces them to rethink what certain competencies mean.
- By gathering feedback from colleagues, students are forced to confront areas where their proficiency is lower. It can be tempting to finetune strengths.
- Aggregated competency data from the cohort (and compared against that of other cohorts) can be presented to students at the end of their internship to enable them to contextualise their competencies against their peers.
- By measuring competencies over time, students can benchmark and finetune their competencies.
- The approach encourages students to see their competencies holistically.

“I really learned a lot about myself by completing the various assessments. Reflecting on what I had and had not accomplished midway in my placement allowed me to think about how I would be able to improve, and what I truly wanted to get out of my placement.”

(Student Intern)

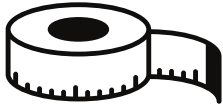


### FOR UNIVERSITIES:

Micro-level measurement of students' proficiency and rates of development can:

- Help a university identify the level and rate of development of different competencies amongst their students, enabling targeted intervention on their return from an internship.
- Help identify areas of relative strength and weakness amongst students, which might highlight employability strengths or gaps in the curriculum.
- Enable a university to develop targeted, evidence-led, employability provision that is tailored to meet the development needs of different student groups (e.g., different demographic or disciplinary groups).
- Facilitate conversations between universities and internship employers about what students need and expect from an internship opportunity.

## Conclusion



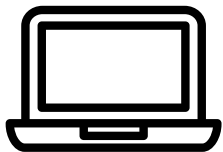
By measuring and tracking students' development and progress during their internships, universities can more effectively understand the value of employability initiatives like these, and how they contribute to a student's outcomes and success.



Data continues to be collected from student interns at the University of Leeds. The next steps for the research are to connect the data with students' academic records, and graduate outcomes, to compare cohorts, and to explore the impact that interventions have on students' progress.



It is hoped that the findings of this research will advance discussion in this important area of Higher Education, and can speak to contemporary challenges facing the sector such as inclusive education and digital upskilling.



For more information and resources, visit the project webpage – [www.bitly.com/valueofworkplacements](http://www.bitly.com/valueofworkplacements)

### About the author:

Dr Helen Hughes is an Associate Professor at Leeds University Business School, and a Chartered Occupational Psychologist. She has expertise in workplace collaboration, studying the social dynamics of workplace relationships and the ways that these can be harnessed by organizations to improve their performance and efficiency, and the wellbeing and satisfaction of employees. She is the Academic Lead for Work Placements, and is passionate about the employability of students. Helen has worked with a range of partners including Rolls-Royce, Jaguar-Land Rover, KPMG, Leeds City Council, and Johnson & Johnson. Her work has been featured in media outlets such as the BBC and Forbes.



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