

Employment and Engagement: Evaluating Art Industry Internships

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Abstract

A successful industry internship should have positive outcomes for both the student and the organisation hosting the student. For the intern student these outcomes are likely to include valuable work experience, a broad understanding of the sector and the opportunity to develop networks; for the host organisation, one of the beneficial outcomes would be gaining assistance in meeting specific work place needs.

But how best can a quality internship experience be ensured for both student and host organisation alike? In attempting to address this question, this paper will examine successful internships, undertaken by visual art students in their honours or final year of the South Australian School of Art (SASA) undergraduate program, and consider the factors that produced beneficial outcomes for both intern and host organisation.

By adopting a case study approach and providing detailed analysis of three selected internships this study will attempt to identify some of the key qualities, characteristics and conditions pertinent to providing a positive and valuable internship experience. In addition, given that improving graduate employability is a desired outcome of experiential learning, this paper will also reflect on the correlation between the internship and the intern student's subsequent employment record.

The study will draw on multiple methods and sources including description of internship projects, analysis of host organisations' assessment of student performance, student evaluation of their placements (related both anecdotally and by more formal methods), and student resumes post graduation.

Findings from this study will be used as a guide to best practice in designing and implementing future internships, in order to maximize students' learning experience and enhance their employment opportunities. Finally, this preliminary investigation will form the basis for a more substantial study that will include surveying a larger group of graduates in order to generate feedback on their internship experience and its relevance to their subsequent employment history.

Introduction

The benefit of internships and work-experience placements for undergraduate students has been well-documented (Blackwell & Bowes 2001, Callanan & Benzing 2004, Rolston & Herrera 2000, Williams 2006, Vogt 2007, CollegeGrad.com 2005); less obvious, however, are the benefits for host organisations. Yet if the evaluations by arts organisations who have

hosted internship students in the *South Australian School of Art: Art Industry Internship Program* (2003-6) are any guidance, student internships have also been beneficial for them. Indeed, this paper was in part prompted by the highly positive response of many host organisations in their assessments of their internship students.

Laudatory comments such as – ‘her contribution to the project was so significant that I have acknowledged her as assistant designer on the exhibition credits’, ‘has done way more than the internship and been of amazing help to us while she has been here’ and ‘My overall impression of the placement was that it was more like working with a colleague than with a student’ - not only indicate the quality of the students involved, but invite speculation about the internship itself. What makes an internship successful? What aspects of the internship were most valued by the host organisations and is there any correlation between these factors and intern students’ subsequent employment? Identifying the features of successful internships will contribute to ongoing improvement of the Internship Program as well as highlighting the qualities that are most valued by arts organisations in their employees.

Method

This study will employ the case study method in investigating the links between internships, evaluation and employment outcomes. Although case studies are more often associated with medical or social sciences, the appearance of the case study in visual arts research (in particular, art education) has become noticeably more frequent. A case study is both a description and an analysis of an event or activity (or sequential events) within its contextual environment. The case study approach, therefore, assumes a relationship between the particular and the general (Frow, 2003, p. 14).

According to Kin ‘*A case study is an empirical inquiry that:*

- investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when
- the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which
- multiple sources of evidence are used’ (1989, p. 23)

This multi-case study of three internships covers the period 2003 to the present and includes reference to the intern students’ graduate employment records. The study will proceed to describe the projects specific to each case study and summarise the assessment and evaluation data. In conclusion, I will draw on the case studies in order to identify the salient aspects of the internship valued most by the host organisations in order to gain a sharpened understanding of the connections between internships and employment.

One of the key characteristics of the case study approach is the use of multiple sources of evidence (Gillham, 2000, p. 2). The sources that are the basis for this study include student

internship reports, host organisations' evaluations of the internship via completed assessment forms and informal methods such as email correspondence or conversation, and student resumes. Later research may include follow-up interviews with the internship/graduates. There are different types of case studies. *Employment and Engagement: Evaluating Art Industry Internships* is an exploratory case study which aims to serve as the basis for a larger study investigating the relationship between internships and graduate employment outcomes.

The Internship

The aim of the *Art Industry Internship Program* is to provide students with vocational experience and an enhanced understanding of the arts industry while undertaking work that is of value to the host organisation. The opportunity to undertake a placement with an arts organisation or business is offered to honours and final year undergraduate students and is undertaken as a semester unit. The student is required to commit 72 hours to the host organisation normally comprising of one to two days per week over a four to eight week period. The *Internship Program* has a double focus: to gain first hand experience of the function and operation of a contemporary art organisation or institution and to undertake a specific research task or project that is of benefit both to the student and to the host organisation. Upon completing the placement the student produces a report, documenting both the context (the host organisation) and the internship project.

The Case Studies

For the purpose of this study, the appraisal of internships as 'successful' is based on the following criteria:

- The fulfilment of the internship requirements warranting a grade of Distinction or above.
- The host organisation's assessment of the student's performance and contribution to the organisation, deemed as 'excellent' based on a sliding scale of 5 from 'poor' to 'excellent'. The assessment form evaluates the student's performance in terms of six categories based on the university's Graduate Qualities.
- The student's own positive assessment of her internship.

Since graduating the internship students have attained employment in the arts industry and their internship experiences have been an influence in this regard. It therefore seemed useful to identify the characteristics of these first-rate internships so that these findings can inform future internship project design.

The subjects of my study have also maintained their own art practice. Like many others working in the visual arts industry they wear a number of hats: artist, curator, arts administrator. The findings of the Myer Report that 'Due to the generally low returns from their

primary artistic activities, visual artists and craft practitioners regularly take other work to help support their practice' (2002, p. 53) is the reality for most visual art graduates today. It is therefore advantageous for many reasons, not least the importance of networking, that their mixed portfolio of income sources be arts-related rather than from occupations outside the industry.

Case Study A

Internship Project: Fieldwork in Community Arts (2003)

Host Organisation: Multi-function Arts and Community Venue

This placement was undertaken at a multi-function arts and community venue and introduced the student to the field of community arts and community cultural development. The intern's time was spent in 'shadowing' the two staff members responsible for community arts, who provided the student with 'an introduction to the daily expectations, duties, networking and obligations encompassed in this role.'¹ The student's report included a detailed internship diary that itemized daily activities ranging from 'assisting with the preparation, marketing, promotion and opening of an exhibition, renewing display and information boards (to) promotion and contract agreements for art workshops, function bookings, safety procedures and the strategic review of the centre's service'. In her report the student concluded that the community arts worker needs to be 'multi-skilled, versatile and organised'.

The host organisation's assessment of the student was comprehensive noting that '(the student) always contributed positively, helpfully, creatively and individually' and rating her performance as excellent in all six categories on the assessment form supplied. She was commended for her keen understanding of how all levels of the organisation worked and her ability 'to grasp what is involved in community arts'. The evaluation praised her empathy (responding sensitively to others and 'acting accordingly be they young, old, from ESL backgrounds, council representatives etc') her communication skills ('a clear . . . effective and easy approach with both staff and clients') and her willingness to help with diverse tasks from 'setting up a launch for an exhibition through to writing up a strategy plan for a review'. The host organisation's assessment concluded with '(The student) has done way more than the internship and been of amazing help to us while she has been here. She has offered much'.

In turn, the student valued the diversity of experience offered, the willingness of the staff to share information and their awareness of how her 'existing skills and knowledge could be best applied'. She was encouraged by the host organisation's staff to 'register for future employment (casual front of house)' in the functions centre and, most importantly, was introduced to a vibrant sector of the arts industry, not previously covered by her university course (although as the student's report noted, the essential skills required by professionals in community arts/community cultural development correspond neatly to the university's

graduate qualities.) This sector of the arts industry has subsequently provided the student with career opportunities and employment.

The intern's resume reveals that her internship provided clear beneficial career and employment outcomes and her association with the host organisation is ongoing.

The student undertook a second placement with the same organisation in 2004 as part of her honours year. This time her placement focused solely on a major community art project and utilized her studio-based skills to run photography and poster workshops for young parent groups. Her ongoing involvement with this three year project (2004-7) is in a paid capacity and she is currently undertaking two roles, one as Artist-Coordinator and the other as Project Manager.

Since graduation she has been recruited by the host organisation for short term and casual employment in a number of areas including tutoring in a series of workshops in photography (2004), as 'front of house' for the function centre (2003- ongoing) and gallery assistant for the venue's access gallery (2004). She is currently enrolled in a Graduate Diploma in Community Cultural Development (2005-7).

Like many visual arts professionals, her employment portfolio is comprised of part-time and short term contract work; however, as the list of projects she has been involved with indicates, she is well on track to establishing a successful career in community arts. As her resume demonstrates (as subsequently confirmed in conversation) her post university employment and post-graduate study has been a direct outcome either of the internship or of the networking opportunities it afforded.

Case Study B

Internship Project: Canvas Board Fundraiser Auction (2003)

Host Organisation: Government funded contemporary art space: the organisation exhibits the work of established and emerging artists and produces a regular arts publication.

The Canvas Board Auction was a fundraising event consisting of almost 100 local and national artists donating a canvas board work of equal size to be auctioned on a fixed date for a fixed sale price of \$100.00ⁱⁱ. The auction, which also had been scheduled in previous years, was a valuable fundraiser for the organisation and an excellent showcase of local and national artists in an equal and innovative format.

The student was responsible for coordinating the event which consisted of 'compiling the list of artists to invite to participate in the fundraiser, writing letters of invitation, and organizing sponsorship . . . and the specifics of the auction process'. All parties agreed that 'The

fundraiser ran smoothly and according to plan and worked as a financial success for the organisation’.

The student had undertaken a previous placement at the same institution assisting with gallery administration. Tasks for this internship included sorting files, assisting with mail-outs and media releases and preparing, installing and demounting exhibitions. The host organisation praised the student for her diligence, her eagerness to learn and seek guidance when required, and her communication skills. Thus the student gained confidence via the process of familiarization with gallery procedures and protocols, thereby providing a sound basis for the project of her second placement, the Fundraiser Auction.

The student’s first report outlines the history, function and operation of the organization, as well as including an intern diary. The second report focuses specifically on the organisation and development of the Canvas Board Fundraiser Auction and is an excellent model for similar projects. It covers all aspects of the process, including benefits to the organisation and stakeholders and recommendations for future fundraisers.

The intern was rated by her host organisations as excellent in all categories. All comments were positive with particular emphasis placed on the student’s astute awareness of the organisation’s needs. ‘(The student) quickly developed a sound understanding of what was required to carry out publishing, gallery admin and fundraising responsibilities’. Her ability to work at a professional and autonomous level was also highly valued; she ‘developed an excellent knowledge of professional practice relating to publishing and exhibiting’ and ‘worked autonomously on 2 fundraiser projects, ensuring their success’. The intern’s ‘outstanding verbal and written communication skills’ were also commended.

In her report the student commented on the dedication of the staff to the organisation and the wider arts community, and acknowledged the support she had received from them. She stated that the internship had been an ‘invaluable learning opportunity’ and was extremely grateful to all the staff for ‘their encouragement and belief in me’.

The student reported in a published interview (Masters, 2004) and in conversation, that her employment as a gallery assistant (part-time 2004-5) was a direct result of the internship and that it also influenced her decision to follow her undergraduate degree Bachelor of Visual Arts (Honours) with a Graduate Diploma in Management (Arts) (2004). Subsequent to this, she gained full-time employment in the arts industry, first with a national network and advocacy body for artists (2005-6) and currently as the Visual Arts Coordinator for a major arts festival.

Case Study C

Internship Project: The Development of an Archival System for Record Keeping (2005)

Host Organisation: Professional organisation of the craft and design industry

The project undertaken by this intern was the planning and implementation of an archive system for the peak professional body servicing the state's craft and design sector. The processes undertaken by the intern included an initial stage of research and consultation to ensure appropriate standards, the development of archival policies relevant to the organisation, establishment of a records disposal schedule and 'the implementation of the archive process and the creation of an electronic database of archival records'.

In addition to the above project the intern also assisted staff 'with the diverse range of duties required within a small arts organisation' and the development of a members' library database. These activities however, were not included in the student's report as they were not the primary focus of the placement. The intern's report provided a profile of the organisation and outlined 'the duties and processes undertaken in researching and creating an archival system'. As a documentary record the report 'will assist staff in the future in the continued development and management of the archive'.

The intern achieved a rating of excellent in all six categories. The host organisation's comments were positive on all accounts commending the student's application of 'logical, critical and creative thinking' to the tasks at hand. Reserved for particular praise were her 'exceptional organisational and communication skills'. Indeed, the host organisation's assessment form commends the student's communication skills in 4 of the 6 categories and concludes that '(The intern) has exceptional communication skills – written, verbal and interpersonal. These skills enabled (her) to communicate with staff, members of the public and the board . . . effectively and efficiently – and were critical to the successful completion of the projects undertaken during the internship.' As with the previous two case studies the student was also commended on her ability 'to know when to seek information or assistance'.

In a personal note to the Internship Program Coordinator, the Executive Director of the host organisation noted that the placement had been highly beneficial and advised that they would employ (the student) on a short term contract to finish the archiving process, which, due to the time constraints of the internship had not been completed. The intern also found the experience valuable, adding that she developed an understanding of a contemporary art organisation and 'gained knowledge of archival processes and creation of electronic databases.'

Since graduating the intern has obtained part-time work as a craft practitioner while retaining her association with the host organisation. She completed the archival project (2005) as planned and was subsequently employed part-time as a Membership Services Officer with

the same organisation (2006 - ongoing). Hence, as with the other two case studies, there was a direct link between the internship and subsequent employment.

Summary

Each of the internship projects and placements was quite different. Of the three host organisations, one was a contemporary art space, one a community venue and the third an artists' advocacy organisation. The projects, similarly varied, included exhibition development and installation, shadowing and assisting community arts personnel and the design and implementation of an archive system. However, while the internships themselves differed there were shared student outcomes in terms of assessment and employment. In addition to rating the students as 'excellent' (a prerequisite for inclusion in this study)ⁱⁱⁱ all three host organisations commented positively and comprehensively on the interns' performance. As the host assessments made clear (and subsequent conversations between the course coordinator and the host organisations confirmed) the interns were highly regarded and their contributions to their host organisations often exceeded expectation. Post graduation, the three students obtained employment in the visual arts and craft industry and indeed, were offered paid work by their host organisation immediately following their internships. This last factor coincides with the research findings that '...interns are often hired by the companies where they are doing internships.'

(<http://ilearn.senecac.on.ca/careers/experience/intern.html>). (See also Longson, 2006, p. 87)

The host organisations' assessments as well as highlighting the interns' achievements also revealed broad agreement as to the competencies that were most valued in their interns.

These were:

- communications skills
- knowledge of the host organisation, its structure, function and purpose
- flexibility
- fulfilling requirements above and beyond the necessary standard.

Communication skills

The host organisations placed high value on good communication skills. This is supported by evidence across the whole spectrum of the Internship Program with host organisations placing emphasis on the importance of effective communication in both written and verbal forms. Given that arts organisations are required to communicate across a range of situations, from dealing with the general public to funding bodies - and with diverse client groups, from artists to industry partners - it is not surprising that communications skills are highly valued by the sector.

Knowledge of the organisation, its structure, function and purpose

Host organisations valued students who had insight into how their organisations worked and were alert to how their own contribution fitted with the needs of the organisation.

Flexibility

As befits many small art organisations, host organisations valued flexibility in their staff. Interns who were prepared to assist with a diverse range of tasks and duties and who exhibited a willingness to learn whether acquiring new skills, new technologies or new methods were highly regarded.

Fulfilling requirements above and beyond the necessary standard.

As evidenced either by the host organisations' assessment forms, or anecdotally, organisations valued those students whose contribution exceeded expectations. This may well be an example where 'persistent 110 per cent effort pays off' (Longson, 2006, p. 96): for students who demonstrated a high level of commitment were more likely to be rewarded by the offer of paid work or recommendation to other employers.

In some cases, the willingness to work till the job is done may translate into payment for the additional work, should the project run over schedule (as happened with Case Study C). Such an outcome, however, also reflects the value of the project to the host organisation. It may be that a well-conceived, good quality project that meets the needs of the host organisation and is outcome-specific provides a distinct advantage over the more nebulous work-experience based internship. Hence, making the latter type of internship task specific, or reconfiguring it as a project pertaining to the management of cultural services could be an advantage. More could be written on the ideal qualities of an internship project but this is better left to future research. Moreover, as Blackwell and Bowes caution, 'The temptation to think that there is only one ideal form of work experience should be avoided because different forms may offer different benefits' (Blackwell & Bowes, 2001, p. 282). From my own experience (and this is borne out by my case studies) the best projects emerge out of a process of informed consultation between host organisation and internship coordinator.

Conclusion

The example of these case studies demonstrates a direct link, at least in the short term, between internships and graduate employment. While a broader study would be unlikely to replicate such a close correlation between the two, a significant body of research has established the connection between experiential learning and employment, so the above results are not necessarily surprising.

However, this exploratory study of successful internships makes it possible to identify some of the qualities that host organisations most value in intern students and to consider the types of internships that may be more beneficial to securing employment. These findings have

implications for future research as well as pointing to practical strategies for maximizing graduate employment outcomes. These include:

- Increased consultation with prospective host organisations in order to advise them of the benefits of internships, and to involve them in designing internship projects that are tailored to their needs.
- Better preparation of students prior to their placement by focusing on improving preliminary research into host organisations, and by promoting the value of a motivated and committed approach to their internship (the 110 per cent rule).
- And placing more emphasis in the Internship Program, and the visual arts curriculum in general, on fostering good communication skills.

These 3 internships represent 'success stories' and as such, stand as models for best practice. But the blend of keen and conscientious students with committed and qualified professionals isn't simply the result of serendipity. Successful internships depend on good management, planning and sound pedagogical practice; their value lies with forming a bridge between study and work and thereby enhancing the art school experience.

Notes

ⁱ Unless otherwise stated, all unacknowledged quotes come from the internship students' reports or the host organisations' assessment forms.

ⁱⁱ The procedure for the auction involved bidders paying for bidding slips which were then placed in an envelope with the name of the artist/art work on it. During the auction process, the contents of the envelope were emptied into a box and the MC drew the lucky winner who was entitled to purchase the work. This process continued until all works had been auctioned.

ⁱⁱⁱ It should be noted that this paper isn't claiming that an inevitable outcome for all internship students is outstanding results and immediate employment; nor does this paper claim a direct correlation between academic excellence and a successful internship. Although the academic records of the 3 students of my case studies demonstrate a relatively high level of achievement this doesn't hold true for all internship students. To include further case studies would have extended the scope of this paper beyond requirements; however, the results of students whose academic achievements have been more modest also show that the

successful completion of an internship can be linked to finding career-oriented employment. Thus it would seem that factors such as the appropriate matching of student, project and host organisation are as equally important as academic achievement in ensuring good outcomes.

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Biography

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