

# **A Prototype Model for Mini-Knowledge Transfer Delivered Through a Graduate Internship Programme**

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## **Abstract**

This case study will highlight an example of breaching the virtual wall separating the worlds of the university and business through a pilot graduate internship programme at the University of Greenwich with 52 Graduate Interns and 34 SMEs during 2012/13. It debates the merits of graduate internship programmes from both intern and business perspectives and reports the findings from the University of Greenwich Project which involved a series of training courses to equip interns with specific skills of market research, competitor analysis and social media marketing to provide added value projects to the SME network.

## **1.0 Introduction**

The Graduate Internship Programme (GIP) was a University of Greenwich (UoG) initiative to help recent graduates gain additional graduate level work experience and improve their employability. It built upon the successful practice of a similar GIP delivered earlier, which delivered major benefits to both graduate and business [1]

## **1.1 Background**

The unprecedented 8.5% increase in student numbers at UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) over the period 2006/7 to 2010/11 entering an economic environment of triple dip recession has resulted in disturbing 9% graduate unemployment for two successive years [2].

Whilst this provides a challenge for HEI's as they wrestle to improve graduate employment and employability, it equally exposes an opportunity to examine alternative solutions to engage with the business community in innovative ways to enable universities to do what they do best, that is capitalize on their knowledge base.

## **1.2 Solving a problem**

Influential thinking has long advocated the development of knowledge transfer activities between the Universities' knowledge base and the business world; the Wilson Review [3] being the most recent, in a series of consistent approaches stemming back to the pivotal Lambert Review and beyond [4].

Wilson acknowledges the quality and quantity of business-university collaboration during the last decade emphasizing the specific value of initiatives, such as the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF), aimed at embedding knowledge exchange with business in the form of targeted funding 'to support and develop a broad range of knowledge-based interactions between universities and colleges and the wider world which result in economic and social benefit to the UK' [5]

This landscape straddling the business-university continuum is peppered with a diverse range of collaborative models, which Wilson describes as 'domains' all aspiring to share knowledge and expand into business support activities. Sandwich degree programmes, internships and work-based programmes feature as mechanisms to enhance graduate skills and nurture the transition between university and business environments.

Wilson mentions the current 'misalignment' between university graduates and the number of jobs available in the corporate sector (a traditional route for employment). Wilson specifically identifies the opportunities available for graduates in the SME sector, together with self-employment and the role universities have in promoting these additional opportunities.

In a climate where universities are generating increasing numbers of graduates who struggle to find work that was traditionally anticipated in the corporate sector, Wilson's suggestions resonate with increased awareness of new opportunities for the graduate population and elicit a moral obligation to raise awareness amongst graduates of the alternative job openings within SMEs.

As the SME sector of the economy represents 99.9% of the businesses in the UK economy by number 'They are a vital part of the UK economy and a dynamic, growing SME sector is likely to contribute significantly to future economic growth' Furthermore, it is a sector which has grown by 38% from 3.5m to 4.8m 2000-12 a growth trajectory which cannot be ignored for potential job opportunities [6, 7.]

## **2.0 Graduate Internship Programme 2012**

In this problematic context, the University of Greenwich (UoG) initiated a graduate internship programme in October 2012 to assist elements of its graduate cohort from 2012 to secure graduate employment and explore the feasibility of assisting the local SME network. This project entailed a period of training and preparation of 60 committed candidates through a series of 5 one-day themed workshops, which focused on either: market research, competitor analysis, social media marketing. These were supplemented by the softer skills of presentation and communication skills and interview techniques.

Asynchronously, employers were offered an intern to work on a specific project along the lines of those selected by the project themes: market research, competitor analysis, social media marketing.

There were 34 SMEs with 2 public sector organisations (often one employer requested multiple projects). This resulted in 52 viable intern-employer project matches. Employer demand exceeded intern supply, as an additional 6 SME's could not be matched with a suitable intern within the scope of the project.

The size and scope of the employers reflected the strong legacy of a highly committed and engaged SME employer network that were beneficiaries of a European Funded Business Support Project at the UoG prior to the internship programme. Each of the 34 SMEs keen for interns had already demonstrated a commitment to their involvement with university through attending knowledge development workshops moreover, 27 of the 34 had been in receipt of tailored academic support through an Innovation Voucher scheme. Implicit here is the fact

that 27 SMEs were already on a journey, acquiring the knowledge to assist in business growth. Of the 34 employers 29 were micro businesses employing less than 10 people.

It is against this backdrop of business size and commitment to personal business development that the interns were able to add further to that thirst for business knowledge. The extent to which interns add value to a business is a topic for further discussion and development.

Whilst Narayanan maintains that: "Despite the growing popularity of internships, surprisingly little research has investigated causes of their effectiveness" [8]. There is evidence to the contrary suggesting that internships are popular, precisely because they add value to the business.

Rick Wieble studied the positive impact of interns in marketing departments [9] whereas Knechel illustrates a similarly positive value of internship to accounting practices [10] and Miller reported equally beneficial findings with physiotherapists [11].

Besides adding value, employers perceive multiple benefits as the interns provide, not only, specific knowledge but also a way to expand the workforce, testing out potential employees at minimal risk [12, 13, 14, 15, 16]

Yet these benefits are not just one-directional as interns themselves reap returns from their involvement in the firm. They gain recent and relevant work experience to enhance their CV, gain an advantage in a competitive jobs market, a chance to test out their technical knowledge and discover whether they are suited to a particular type of work, as well as interview and job experience. In short there is a reciprocal exchange of knowledge for experience where both parties enjoy multiple benefits [17, 18] Therefore a symbiotic relationship emerges where both employers and interns derive multiple benefits from the internship experience.

To what extent do employers pursue internships to acquire new knowledge? There have been initiatives designed by employers specifically to sponsor the creation of new ideas, which might be commercially viable. Sun Systems ran a project for Scottish Universities [19]. An American Insurance company sponsored an internship programme with the University of Connecticut and the University of Hartford [20] but recent evidence to support the nurturing of sponsored internships is sparse. Perhaps the harsh economic climate has a negative impact on the investment in such areas.

In the context of high graduate unemployment, the UoG model of providing an internship in SMEs proved to be a fertile ground for business assistance. The assistance was however, highly focused as the interns were equipped with specific project knowledge to add immediate value.

A post-internship online survey was completed by both graduates (n=27) and employers (n=15) who reflected on the positive benefits of the project:

Employers reported:

*'Fantastic, I now have 2 interns undertaking paid and voluntary work with me until they find full time employment. They are invaluable and it is a truly mutually agreeable arrangement'.*

*'The GIP was an extremely helpful and productive process. We gained priceless insights into our business which will help us grow in the future'.*

*'He has brought us the technical knowledge and a practical approach....'*

Intern said that the project was:

*'Very informative, useful information, I will be using throughout my career'*

*'It was an intensive project and a good learning experience that gives insight into the real world of employment. It is an experience every graduate should undertake as it prepares you for the real world of employment'*

*'Superb Programme!!! It is something every graduate needs. I highly recommend it... especially the presentation / guest speaker weeks'*

Asked whether they found the internship experience worthwhile, 66% of employers found the project very valuable and 73% were extremely likely or very likely to consider an intern next time. Interns were equally encouraging where 96% of the interns reported that they were extremely likely or very likely to recommend the project to next years' graduates.

Exactly what was delivered during these internships can be precisely identified, as there was an equal split of social media marketing and competitor analysis being the most popular 35% each followed by market research projects 21% and public sector 8%. The long-term impact of the internship intervention is beyond the scope of this analysis and should the subject of further research.

What is notable is that although the intern was appointed to undertake a specific project employers reported that they frequently used this knowledge base to advise in additional areas. This suggests that the knowledge exchange process at this level is a fertile ground for adding value to a SME.

Asked about the value added to their business, 46% of employers reported that they were extremely satisfied with the value added by the intern and 40% would consider a further intern. Further interviews conducted with employers re-enforce these findings emphasizing the positive impact of the internship.

## **Conclusions**

Although relatively small in number, the evidence presented suggests that the UoG graduate internship project has generated mutual benefits to both employers and graduate alike. In an economic climate where SMEs are finding it tough to survive, and although the sector has witnessed considerable expansion, the failure rate of 0.1% cannot be ignored [21]. Therefore, the intervention and support by a university knowledge base through the graduate internship programme has the potential to encourage business growth and minimize business failure.

The UoG Graduate Internship Programme provides a simple template, which could be emulated by other UK HEIs to assist in nurturing SME survival; growth and helping graduates improve their employment prospects.

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