Internship

Ewald Terhart and Ulrike Weyland

Definition

Internships as part of higher education provide practical experience in the field of study and are considered an integral part of the curriculum. They are different from voluntary internships or compulsory practical training after graduation. For maximum benefit, internships should be linked to critical reflection and research-based learning, with a focus on transdisciplinarity and continuous learning. Internships can range from several weeks to several months and are considered "macro-forms of practical relevance" (Hedtke 2000, own translation) in comparison to shorter, situational experiences. Internships fulfill the demand for practical relevance in high-quality academic programs.

In addition to theoretical and knowledge-based studies (lectures, seminars, exercises), the vast majority of higher education programs include learning opportunities for practical experience that often, if not always, take place in the later professional field. In higher education, these learning opportunities are commonly called internships, "field-based experience", or "practicum" (Barron 2020; Kosinar et al. 2019; Ryan et al. 1996).

In its broadest sense, every time-limited change of location or social context can be considered an "internship". According to this broad understanding, "internships may be located anywhere in the world" (Jones 2006, 17). In a narrower sense, internships are elements of university courses and integral components of higher education. Voluntary internships undertaken with potential future employers after graduation or additional compulsory practical training required for the final licensing of state professions (doctors, lawyers, teachers, etc.) are not part of this narrower definition.

From an etymological point of view, the term *practicum* relates to practical activities, in the sense of doing or wanting to do something (from ancient Greek πράσσειν, *prássein* "to do, to accomplish"), while the term *internship* traces back to the Latin *internus* ("inward, internal"). In higher education, "practice" or "the practical" is associated with the idea of real experiences rather than imaginary or

theoretical ones. Thus, a practicum or internship is often considered an additional or complementary element to theoretical studies. During the internship, students gain practical experience by testing things out and getting involved in the problems and realities of their practical field. Yet this simplified view reduces the epistemic and didactic value of internships to mere practical activity.

If, however, internships are regarded and realized as integral parts of the curriculum in higher education and if they purposefully develop the students' academic, research-based attitudes, the practical experience gained in internships is always linked to critical reflection and scientific, research-based learning – not just acquaintance with the realities of the field. Internships as complex, holistic learning opportunities implement the idea of transdisciplinarity as an acknowledgment of plural knowledge resources. Internships also include learning how to keep an analytical, critical distance out in the field and aim to lay the foundations for continuous learning throughout further phases of professional development.

Internships in academic study programs may run for several weeks or several months and can therefore also be characterized as "macro-forms of practical relevance" (Hedtke 2000, 5, own translation). Such forms must be distinguished from practice-related "micro-forms" (Hedtke 2000, 5), such as situationally and temporally limited practical experiences or practical elements within conventional study structures (e.g. creating an action plan, simulations of practice situations, project seminars with practice contacts, work in teaching-learning laboratories with practitioners, etc.). As macro-forms, internships fulfill the continuous and urgent demand for practical relevance and practical orientation as a feature of high-quality academic study programs.

Background

University study programs aim to provide students with academic disciplinary, interdisciplinary, or transdisciplinary knowledge and reflective skills that will enable them to work competently and responsibly while remaining open to new ideas based on new research and a (self-)reflective attitude throughout their professional life. For the few students and graduates who remain in the academic system (initially as junior researchers), their professional practice is research, it is theory. However, the vast majority of students go on to work in professional fields outside the university. Nevertheless, research is the basis of their professional work.

Accordingly, the question of the relationship between *theoretical* knowledge and forms of reflection acquired through study and the *practical* ability to act and make appropriate decisions in the professional setting is key: How does a course of study instill a science-based professionalism characterized by an understanding that this foundation is also a mandate for lifelong science-based and

research-based learning in the profession? This question outlines a central theme in both *theoretically* oriented discourses of self-understanding on the relationship between (academic) disciplines and (practical) profession and – quite *practically* – in the context of the structure and specific curricular and didactic design of academic study programs (Hessler et al. 2013): How can practical learning experiences be meaningfully designed and integrated into academic studies? What kind of curricular formats lead to didactic and educational support for the initiation of transformative learning? Obviously, there are several possible answers to this question as the academic systems, traditions, cultures, and pathways from graduation to employment, etc. are different in all parts of the world.

Internships have long had a place in study programs but to varying degrees. In Europe, their systematic inclusion marks a movement in education and higher education policy associated with the Bologna process, i.e. the introduction of European higher education degrees that are comparable. With the introduction of the bachelor's degree, intended as the first qualification for a profession, the concepts of professional and practical relevance advanced to become guiding formulas for study program design (Schubarth et al. 2012). This not only brought the debate about internships and their significance into the spotlight in higher education policy, it also brought it to the attention of employers. Since then, study programs have included several internships, with various purposes, throughout the course of study. General, introductory internships occur early in the bachelor's degree, while more in-depth internships, possibly abroad (for example in foreign-language studies), occur as the bachelor's degree progresses, and, finally, research-oriented, specialized internships are undertaken during the master's degree.

Teacher education programs around the world typically include (several) internships and the "practicum" in teacher education is probably the most researched internship (Cohen et al. 2013; Degeling et al. 2019; Hodges and Baum 2019; Lawson et al. 2015). In the context of academic internships, teacher education plays a special role because it is not linked to one single academic subject; the study program for teachers is essentially multidisciplinary in terms of at least one subject in addition to educational studies.

Depending on the study program, internships are linked to sometimes overlapping, sometimes competing objectives. They test the stability of the participant's chosen field of study or profession, provide an opportunity to apply acquired theoretical knowledge or research methods "in the field", and see whether the professional field is a good fit for the participant. In some cases, internships also open doors for future employment. In the context of university studies, an internship can also prompt further study, career counseling, or – last but not least – inspire a topic for a final thesis.

However, internships are not simply meant to open up additional learning opportunities for students on a *personal* level. On a general, *societal* level they are

regarded as an open space for exploration that connects the academic world of university study, the academic world of acquiring, producing, and reflecting new knowledge, with the broader contexts outside university: society and culture, the system of professions, the world of industry, commerce, and administration, etc. This contextualizes internships within discussions about the Third Mission of universities: the transfer of knowledge and expertise between academic and non-academic worlds and its transformative role in society.

The idea of *transference* can, in principle, be understood through different motives: The idea of "transfer" is linked with the outward-looking, socio-critical, and innovative tasks of universities (the Third Mission in addition to research and teaching). Innovative and *critical science* should also carry its results and methods out – not least through internships – into society, institutions, professions, etc., thus putting the idea of science into practice in social responsibility. This understanding guided the university reforms and student movements of the 1960s and 1970s and inspired the current concepts of "service learning" and "citizen science" (Angelique 2001; Böhm and Weissköppel 2022; Rieckmann 2015).

During Europe's Bologna Reform and the conversion of degree programs to the bachelor–master system, and in general in the course of a worldwide adaption of higher education to neoliberal ideas and practices, a different understanding of "transfer" dominated. This understanding focused on a stronger alignment between university and student qualification processes and the requirements of the professional world – workplaces of both industry and administration (employability). In this *functional* understanding, "transfer" means preparing graduates to meet the requirements of the target occupational field and rapidly changing labor market (Kapareliotis et al. 2019). This approach must be viewed critically, especially when students only need to meet the demands of their future employers. As long as internships are integrated into academic study, students must be able to study independently of the necessities and specific demands of later workplaces and employers.

However, the relationship between the critical and functional understanding of internships is characterized by a fundamental ambivalence (Weyland and Terhart 2021). When connecting with the two places of learning, namely the university and the internship, students are often confronted with conflicting demands and expectations from different actors. As a result, if clear and explicit goals are not established for the participants, this can lead to role conflicts and also to unintended and counterproductive learning effects for some students. In extreme cases, a fundamental problem can arise: Students, in their role as interns, may not be seen as learners but as a cheap labor force. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that university supervisors prepare their students, keep in contact, and support them by discussing and evaluating their students' experiences during and after the internship (Myers Kiser 2011; Schweizer and King 2018).

This raises the question of who is responsible for planning and organizing internships in the respective degree programs. If the degree programs are *mono-disciplinary*, then each discipline, each subject is responsible for their internships. However, the majority of study programs are not mono-disciplinary. Indeed, the number of multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary study programs is growing: Who organizes, supervises, and evaluates their internships? How can the organization of transdisciplinary internships be secured within the discipline-based institutional structure of universities and colleges? What inter- and transdisciplinary models exist for, for example, environmental science, health science, educational science, sustainability science, and gender studies degree programs?

And finally: How can students successfully combine, integrate, and transcend knowledge from different disciplines and create new transdisciplinary knowledge if the discipline representatives themselves have difficulty with or are skeptical about transdisciplinarity? (Bain et al. 2019; Gibbs 2015; Pohl et al. 2018; Rieckmann 2015; Yeoung 2015). Transdisciplinarity is challenging for academics and researchers, more so than for their students. Ultimately, universities must transform and find solutions for these theoretical and epistemic problems on organizational and curricular levels. Some universities establish new working units or institutions (e.g. interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary centers) to institutionalize interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity (for an overview about international developments see Vienni Baptista and Thompson Klein 2022). These new units are explicitly independent from the traditional disciplines and faculties, which is both an opportunity and a challenge. The centers have to convince the disciplines and groups involved (teaching personnel, mentors, administrators, the representatives of relevant fields of practice, etc.) about the advantages and specific academic and professional value of inter- or transdisciplinary internships to keep all actors "on board". They must also attend to the practical side of the preparation, monitoring, and evaluation of their internships to make sure that "everything works". It is obvious that the *rhetoric* of transdisciplinarity and transformative learning is flourishing in academic discourses about the future of higher education – but it is doubtful that the *reality* of the various internship programs in higher education is being developed in the same way. On this ultimately decisive level, there is still a lot of work to do.

Debate and criticism

There is a growing body of empirical research that accompanies the various theories, programs, and concepts on internships in higher education (Gibbs 2015; Kosinar et al. 2019; Merz et al. 2014; Ryan et al. 1996). This research focuses on various questions: What expectations do students and hosting institutions have of internships? To what extent do internships achieve their goals? How do different actors

evaluate the success of internships? What central learning effects do internships have on further academic studies and later professional biographies? Some of the central research questions and findings related to internships are presented below.

Students generally have very high expectations of internships. "Going intern" embodies hopes for specific, practical experience – in contrast to what they gain from their theoretical courses – and students associate these new practical experiences with personal developmental goals.

Student satisfaction with internships is high overall. According to a survey from the mid-2000s, only 10–13 percent reported being "rather dissatisfied" or "not at all satisfied" (Krawietz et al. 2006) and recent studies have returned similar results. Medical students in particular rate the supervision of their internships very highly (BMBF 2012, survey period 2010; Piedmont and Robra 2015).

The extent to which internships help students transition from the academic to the professional world cannot be assessed reliably as many factors contribute to a successful career transition and not all graduates launch their careers straight after graduation. Nevertheless, research has demonstrated that internships undertaken while studying – especially longer internships in the final phases of the degree – combined with good final grades and timely completion do contribute to a quick and successful start to a career. Studies have also shown that some fundamental personality traits positively impact the transition from study to work (Sarcletti 2009; see also Silva et al. 2016) and that internships have a positive impact on salary (Margaryan et al. 2019).

If the curricular, organizational, and personnel conditions are ensured, internships offer productive learning opportunities to develop and reflect upon academic knowledge, while developing professional competence related to the perception, assessment, and practical management of professional situations.

Current forms of implementation in higher education

Changing knowledge and systems within the (academic) professions are reflected in the growing importance of new forms of internship and, more broadly, gaining practical and field experience during academic studies. Currently, there is a tendency towards immense heterogeneity among the developmental statuses and trajectories of the new kinds of internship. Three main factors have led to these new forms.

(1) *New order of disciplines*: In addition to continuing the more traditional mono-disciplinary or discipline-adding study programs and their internships, there are increasing numbers of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary forms. These forms offer broader access to problem areas of society and the professional world that are not typically "sorted" into the classical disciplines (e.g. nutrition, environmental, cultural, sustainability, or midwifery sciences). In these contexts, intern-

ships have to be organized primarily as communities of practice, as locally integrated bottom-up forms of cooperation between academic and practical worlds (Suh and Jensen 2020).

(2) *New biographical pathways*: Traditional structures for academic, educational, and professional biographies (school or secondary school followed by vocational training, college, or university, graduation, career entry, followed by various phases of professional life, and finally retirement) still persist, primarily in the so-called state professions. However, with increasing modernization and globalization, more flexible biographical patterns and pathways are being sought and realized, alternating between phases of education, renewed education, professional work, study, family, further education, career change, and moving up and down the career ladder. Living, learning, and working are becoming indistinguishable. To meet these growing needs for continuing and further academic education and learning, more and more universities are offering "dual forms" of continuous learning that are placed in both the academic and vocational worlds (Duncan et al. 2017). As another element, universities encourage non-standard students with alternative qualifications to take part in continuing training and education.

(3) *International internships in the context of post-colonial movements*: The conventional practice of conducting international internships to promote the geographical and cultural mobility of students (see Di Pietro 2022) is challenged by debates about a new balance in the relationship between Global North and South. Opportunities to participate in international placements are unequally distributed worldwide. The support for students from the "Global South" needs to be expanded and must be organized in a non-patriarchal way. The development of (inter) cultural competences can only succeed if a participatory approach is pursued (Lambert Snodgrass et al. 2021; Fortune et al. 2019).

In light of these complex developments, the classic internship, a specific period in the course of studies that students experience as "something special", is being phased out. Meanwhile, constant changes between different forms of learning, places of learning, and learning rhythms are increasingly observable in processes of education and training. The modern media and knowledge professions are stimulating and accelerating the still traditionally determined academic and non-academic professional and educational biographies. This is likely to affect the didactic design of and access to internships further.

References

Angelique, Holly L. 2001. Linking the academy to the community through internships: A model of service learning, student empowerment, and transformative education. *Sociological Practice* 3 (1): 37–53.

Bain, Bernice, Keely Griffith, and Jennifer Varney. 2019. Transdisciplinarity practice in higher education. In *Handbook of research on transdisciplinarity knowledge generation*, ed. Victor X Wang, 115–31. Hershey: IGI Global.

Barrón, Nancy G. 2020. Internship models: Acknowledging social and academic expectations. *International Journal of Educational Management* 34 (6): 1049–61.

BMBF. 2012. Forschung und Praxis im Studium. Befunde aus Studierendensurvey und Studienqualitätsmonitor. https://kops.uni-konstanz.de/bitstream/handle/123456789/22246/Multrus_222461.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=2.

Böhm, Urte, and Angela Weissköppel. 2022. Hacking Hochschuldidaktik. Ein Plädoyer für transdisziplinäre, transformative und kritische Denkbewegungen. In *Hochschullehre als Gemeinschafsaufgabe. Akteur:innen und Fachkulturen in lernenden Organisationen*, eds. Nora Leeben, Katja Reinecke, and Ulrike Sonntag, 79–88. Bielefeld: wbv.

Cohen, Ester, Ron Hoz, and Haya Kaplan. 2013. The practicum in preservice teacher education: A review of empirical studies. *Teaching Education* 24 (4): 345–80.

Gibbs, Paul, ed. 2015. *Transdisciplinary professional learning and practice*. Heidelberg: Springer.

Degeling, Maria, Nadine Franken, Stefan Freund, Silvia Greiten, Daniela Neuhaus, and Judith Schellenbach-Zell. eds. 2019. *Herausforderung Kohärenz: Praxisphasen in der universitären Lehrerbildung*. Bad Heilbrunn: Klinkhardt.

Di Pietro, Giorgio. 2022. International internships and skill development: A systematic review. *Review of Education* 10: 1–25.

Duncan, Ken, Downing, Jillian, D'Oliveira Singo, Brigida, Papier, Joy, Hartmann, Martin D., Ogwo, Benjamin A., Ezekoye, Benadeth, and Gessler, Michael. 2017. Session 1 – Vocational education and training: Basics for teaching and research in vocational education and training at universities. In *Vocational education and training in sub-Saharan Africa: Current situation and development*, eds. Gesine Haseloff, Friedhelm Eicker, and Bernd Lennartz, 39–133. Bielefeld: Bertelsmann.

Fortune, Tracy, Shinead Borkovic, Anoo Bhopti, Renee Somoza, Ha Chan Nhan, and Shabnam Rangwala. 2019. Transformative learning through international project-based learning in the Global South: Applying a students-as-partners lens to a "high-impact" capstone. *Journal of Studies in International Education* 23 (1): 49–65.

Hedtke, Reinhold. 2000. Das unstillbare Verlangen nach Praxisbezug. Zum Theorie-Praxis-Problem der Lehrerbildung am Exempel Schulpraktischer Studien. *sowi online journal* 0: 1–17. Available from https://www.sowi-online.de/sites/default/files/hedtke.pdf.

Hessler, Gudrun, Mechthild Oechsle, and Ingrid Scharlau, eds. 2013. Studium und Beruf: *Studienstrategien – Praxiskonzepte – Professionsverständnis: Perspektiven von Studierenden und Lehrenden nach der Bologna-Reform*. Bielefeld: transcript.

Hodges, Thomas, and Angela Baum. eds. 2019. *Handbook of research on field-based teacher education*. Hershey: IGI Global.

Jones, Elka. 2006. Internships: Previewing a profession. *Occupational Outlook Quarterly* 50, Summer: 16–18.

Kosinar, Julia, Alexander Gröschner, and Ulrike Weyland, eds. 2019. *Langzeitpraktika als Lernräume. Historische Bezüge, Konzeptionen und Forschungsbefunde*. Münster: Waxmann.

Kapareliotis, Ilias, Katerina Voutsina, and Athanasios Patsiotis. 2019. Internship and employability prospects: Assessing student's work readiness. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-based Learning* 9 (4): 538–49.

Krawietz, Marian, Peter Müßig-Tapp, and Janka Willige. 2006. Praktika im Studium. Available from http://www.hisbus.de/results/pdf/2006_HIS_Praktika_im_Studium.pdf.

Lambert Snodgrass, Lisa, Margaret Hass, and Mehdi Ghahremani. 2021. Developing cultural intelligence: Experiential interactions in an international internship program. *Journal of Global Education and Research* 5 (2): 165–74.

Lawson, Tony, Melek Cakmak, Müge Gündüz, and Hugh Busher. 2015. Research on teaching practicum – a systematic review. *European Journal of Teacher Education* 38 (3): 392–407.

Margaryan, Shushanik, Nils Saniter, Mathias Schumann, and Thomas Siedler. 2019. *Do internships pay off? The effects of student intership on earnings. Discussion Paper Series*. Bonn: IZA Institute of Labor Economics.

Merz, Carl P., Philipp A. Stoeberl, and Jill Marks. 2014. Building successful internships: Lessons from the research for interns, schools, and employers. *Career Development International* 19 (1): 123–42.

Myers Kiser, Pamela. 2011. *The human services internship: Getting the most from your experience*. Boston, MA: Cengage.

Piedmont, Silke, and Bernt-Peter Robra. 2015. Praxis und Wissenschaft im Studium – Erwartungen und erlebte Kompetenzförderung von Studierenden der Humanmedizin im Vergleich mit Studierenden anderer Fächer *GMS Zeitschrift für Medizinische Ausbildung* 32: 16–30.

Pohl, Christian, Pius Krütli, and Michael Stauffacher. 2018. Teaching transdisciplinarity appropriately for students' education level. GAIA 27: 250–52.

Rieckmann, Marco. 2015. Transdisziplinäre Forschung und Lehre als Brücke zwischen Zivilgesellschaft und Hochschule. *Zeitschrift für internationale Bildungsforschung und Entwicklungspädagogik* 38: 4–10.

Ryan, Greg, Susan Toohey, and Chris Hughes. 1996. The purpose, the value and structure of the practicum in higher education: A literature review. *Higher Education* 31: 355–77.

Sarcletti, Andreas. 2009. *Die Bedeutung von Praktika und studentischer Erwerbstätigkeiten für den Berufseinstieg*. München: IHF. Available from https://www.

ihf.bayern.de/fileadmin/news_import/ihf_studien_hochschulforschung-77.pdf.

Schubarth, Wilfried, Karsten Speck, Andreas Seidel, Corinna Gottmann, Caroline Kamm, and Maud Kroh, eds. 2012. *Studium nach Bologna: Praxisbezüge stärken?! Praktika als Brücke zwischen Hochschule und Arbeitsmarkt*. Wiesbaden: Springer.

Schweizer, H. Frederik, and Mary M. King. 2018. *The successful internship: Personal, professional, and civic development in experiential learning*. 5th edition. Boston: Cengage.

Silva, Patricia, Betina Lopes, Marco Costa, Ana Melo, Goncalo P. Dias, Elisabeth Brito, and Dina Seabra. 2016. The million-dollar question: Can internships boost employment? *Studies in Higher Education* 72 (1): 2–21.

Suh, Emily, and Darin Jensen. 2020. Examining communities of practice: Transdisciplinarity, resilience, and professional identity. *Journal of Basic Writing* 39 (2): 33–59.

Vienni Baptista, Bianca, and Julie Thompson Klein, eds. 2022. *Institutionalizing interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity: Collaboration across cultures and communities*. New York: Routledge.

Weyland, Ulrike, and Ewald Terhart. 2021. Praktikum. In *Handbuch Transdisziplinäre Didaktik*, eds. Tobias Schmohl and Thorsten Philipp, 231–42. Bielefeld: transcript.

Yeung, Raymond. 2015. Transdisciplinary learning in professional practice. In *Transdisciplinary professional learning and practice*, ed. Paul Gibbs, 89–96. Heidelberg: Springer.