

The Interrelationship between Internship and Employability: A Critical Literature Review [†]

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Abstract: It is well known that the transition from education to employment is not an easy task. Unfortunately, a degree is not enough to find a qualified job. Universities have to respond to this demand taking into account the functions that are associated with their role in society, such as the development of successful internship programs, which adjust to the needs of the labor market. The complexity of this phenomenon justifies the increase of the research in this field. Despite the public discourse, previous empirical evidence is scant and unsystematic. In this context, the aim of this paper is to analyze the existing evidence published in highly qualified scientific journals in order to combine the existing knowledge and look for points in common and future lines of research. The results of this critical literature review are interesting for diverse stakeholders such as: (i) policy makers, who are keen to realize the knowledge economy vision by increasing the supply of graduates; (ii) employers, who are continuously revising the skills required by graduates; (iii) as well as graduates themselves, who require to be incorporated to the labor market fast and efficiency.

Keywords: internship; employability; literature review; Web of Science

1. Introduction

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are increasingly required to produce highly skilled graduates who are able to respond to the ever changing and complex needs of the contemporary workplace. Moreover, rising graduate unemployment, due partially to the global financial crisis, place additional pressures to focus on this subject. Meanwhile, the notion of employability raises questions regarding the extent to which graduates are, or should be, work-readying if so, how and where work-readiness is acquired. Indeed, serious concerns have been expressed about an increasingly wide gap between the skills and capabilities of graduates, and the requirements and demands of the work environment in an increasingly mobile and globalized society. In this context, internships have been gaining popularity as a way for students to acquire and demonstrate work-related skills. However, in practice the use of internships has raised concerns related to the potential exploitation of vulnerable young workers [1,2].

The aim of this paper is therefore to realize a critical analysis of the existing literature about the adaptability of higher education to the demand of labor market and, more precisely, the role of internship into this crucial process. To that end, we revise more than one hundred of articles published in Web of Science (WoS) Principal Collection in order to exploring the tensions in existing studies on employability and its link to internship.

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The remainder of the article is divided in five sections as follows. Section two describes the methodology and sample employed. Section three presents the main empirical results. Finally, Section four provides the conclusions of our analysis as well as a description of future research.

2. Methodology and Sample

The methodology employed in this study is characterized by subsequent steps. First, we searched for articles related to the keywords “employability” and “internship” in the Web of Science (WoS) Principal Collection database. Subsequently, we refined the search to the type of document “articles”. After that, we selected those articles that were included at the Journal Citation Report (JCR) which have an impact factor. Finally, we focused on the articles directly related to the subject under study.

The main objective has been to analyze whether this relevant issue for students, employees, HEIs and government institutions has had any impact on publication and disclosure. To that end, a content analysis of the selected articles was carried out based on some previous studies of bibliographic review carried out for other research areas, such as those of [6,7].

Based on the review of these previous works, some indicators were selected for the analysis of the articles in the sample: number of publications per year, the topics and approaches of the research, selection of samples and their geographical location, main authors and scientific journals that publish on this subject.

As a result of the search, we found an initial sample of 109 documents, of which we selected 62 articles, eliminating those not indexed in JCR, reducing the sample to 32 articles. Finally, we focus on those whose subject is directly related to the relationship between internship and employability, thus delimiting the study sample to 19 articles.

3. Main Empirical Results

Our results reveal the existence of a low level of publications until the year 2003, after which scientific production begins to increase, with the highest peak in 2017 with four publications. Probably, behind this evolution is the creation in 1999 of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The EHEA is an ambitious and complex plan that the countries of the old continent have set in motion to favor European convergence in education. It was created in 1999 with the signing of the Bologna Declaration, agreeing on the constitution of a university system that would facilitate greater possibilities for training and employment. Among other changes, the need for higher education institutions to make changes in the teaching-learning methodologies and in the curricular structure was contemplated. In this sense, an important novelty in relation to the curricular structure was the incorporation of internship into the curricula. Since then, internship or external practices are subjects that the undergraduates attend, hence the interest that has led to their study and the relationship with the employability of students since that date.

The subject of research on higher education practices is diverse. In the review of the literature, we identified 9 researches on specific topics, in addition to 9 others that approach the subject from a generic perspective. Among the topics discussed are the practices of music, biology, geography, ICT sector, forestry, dietetics, psychology of industrial organization, and business schools.

In relation to the sources of data collection, most of the data from the analyzed works were obtained through interviews (4) and surveys (7) to students and employers, either by email, telephone, personally or through websites. The other works used other databases (for example, data published by the Government on higher education).

Most of the articles are written by Anglo-Saxon authors (from Australia, Canada, UK and USA) as well as the productivity of authors from Europe is increasingly year by year due to the

adoption of the Bologna reforms in the European High Education System. Meanwhile, we have to highlight the works of Silva et al. [8,9] from the University of Aveiro. These authors provide a rigorous quantitative research of this subject that should be taken into account for future research in other Member States of the European Union.

4. Conclusions

One of the basic pillars of higher education is education for employment. For governments, as responsible for the design of educational policies, and for universities, as responsible for their execution, promoting the employability of students and having information about their return to work should be priority objectives.

The European higher education system, traditionally focused on learning content in the classroom, has experienced since the creation in 1999 of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) a radical transformation, giving great importance to the acquisition of the skills and competencies demanded by the working market.

In the context of an educational system of higher education that prioritizes the acquisition of skills and competencies for employment, the internship carried out by students in companies and entities constitute a fundamental part. In this sense, analyzing if the internship are really constituting an adequate way to improve the employability of the students takes on special relevance.

However, despite having passed more than 18 years since the creation of the European Higher Education Area, academic literature has scarcely dealt with the relationship between internship and employability in higher education students.

The publication of an article in an indexed journal JCR constitutes a guarantee of the quality of the research carried out. In this sense, we have been surprised that since the creation of the European Higher Education Area, the reference academic literature has scarcely dealt with the relationship between the internships of higher education students and their labor insertion. Specifically, during the period analyzed (1998–2018) only 19 JCR articles directly related to the topic have been published. The scant interest in this issue in Europe is also surprising (only 6 of the 19 published papers are European), and the qualitative approach of most of the works is also surprising (15). In the positive sense, note that of the four quantitative works, three are European, two from Portuguese universities and one from the Netherlands. It is not by chance, because the great Anglo-Saxon influence in the Portuguese educational system is known.

The review of the literature shows the scarce scientific evidence available on the relationship between the internships of higher education students and their employability. Given that this is a question of enormous interest for governments, universities, students, companies and entities, we consider that from an academic point of view it should be given greater attention. This work shows, therefore, that there is a field of research in the field of economics and education of great interest but poorly addressed, constituting an important field for future research.

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