

# Final Report – Leaving the Ivory Tower: Internships and employability for international studies students

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## Framework

It has become apparent in recent years that higher education is increasingly facing the challenge of producing graduates with the necessary professional skills and competencies needed in our present society. There is rising pressure to maximise the potential of internships and the study environment in order to develop the skills needed for the workplace through the use of innovative pedagogical practices like problem-based learning (Musa et al.; Johari & Bradshaw, 2008; Treleaven & Voola, 2008). This has coincided with a growing focus by the Danish government and Universities on what students are able to do as a result of their higher education and how best to prepare them for a job in their field of studies in light of increasing demands from employers. Such questions have placed the issue of how students learn in higher education at center stage and has put pressure on universities to reevaluate their study programmes and reimagine traditional conceptualisations of the study environment beyond the university campus to meet 21<sup>st</sup> century learning demands. This increasing focus on employability has therefore made it extremely important for higher education institutions to explore further the benefits of implementing and integrating learning through internships (LTI), which seeks to engage students in a “real-world” learning context, into the PBL model and necessary to reimagine the study environment beyond the university campus in order to develop the key competencies needed for the competitive job market. As Musa et al. notes, ‘many skills learned through problem-based learning are highly sought by today’s employers including the ability to work well with others, handle interpersonal conflicts, make thoughtful decisions, as well as practice and solve complex problems’ (2012: 565). Furthermore, the integration of PBL into both study programmes and internship placements can help graduates generalise the knowledge they gain at university into real world contexts and be able to transfer key skills. Thus, while the integration of PBL into internships presents an opportunity for students to learn how to translate competencies, gain practical experience, and network it also presents universities with the question of what is best way to help students maximise the potential of internships and prepare them for the world of work.

Therefore, the aim of this project was to understand the interactions between learners, real tasks and supervisors in PBL learning internships and projects at DIR and ES and evaluate **how these study programmes are equipping its students with the necessary skills to get a job** in the fields of Development and International Relations.

Therefore, the project set out to address **three key challenges** which both DIR/ES students and the Department of Culture and Global Studies face:

1. how to help students get a job which is directly **linked to their intended profession**

2. how to assist students to **identify the employability skills** they are learning through PBL and link them to professional goals
3. **how to use the internship project** as an opportunity to enhance students' employability and skills as well as it being an academic project.

## Methods

### Document analyses

We began by analyzing existing material regarding internships and employability for students at the study board for international affairs. For instance, the graduate survey from 2016 was used to identify key challenges that the graduates themselves point to as obstacles in finding their first job.

In addition to the graduate survey, we also analyzed the internship evaluations from the internship hosts, in order to identify the tasks and job function that international studies students engage in during an internship.

We used the findings from the document analysis to identify relevant themes for the interviews with students and internship hosts.

### Focus group interviews

We did focus group interviews with 8. and 10. semester students. The eighth semester students were in the middle of finding relevant internship placements, while the 10<sup>th</sup> semester students had just returned from their internships. The student participants were found both by posts on Moodle and on social media and through personal contacts/snowballing. The interviews were recorded and structured around central themes identified through the document analysis and through our previous conversations with internship students.

### Interviews with internship hosts in Denmark

As international studies internships have to have an international dimension, most international studies students choose to go abroad for their internship. There are, however, around 15 – 20 students who stay with international organizations in DK during their internship. We contacted these organizations and set up interviews with as many of them as practically possible. The interviewees included Arctic House in Aalborg, UN City in Copenhagen, AAU Innovation, UNHCR in Copenhagen, Agro Business Park in Aarhus. The interviews were semi-structured. We recorded the interviews and later had them transcribed by a student assistant.

### Interviews with relevant AAU staff

In addition to the internship hosts and the students, we also interviewed key personnel at AAU, such as our contact at the international office, the 9th semester coordinator, and AAU Career.

## Findings

### Initial phase

We identified three key challenges in getting the first job from the graduate survey.

1. How to translate competencies gained at AAU into marketable skills in the current job market?

2. A lack of relevant, practical experience – few students are able to find relevant study jobs in Aalborg.
3. Limited job-related network

These three challenges can all be addressed by an increased focus on the internship semester. The translation of competencies into marketable job skills is also a necessary part of the application process for an internship, as the competition is quite fierce for the most interesting places.

The last two challenges are directly related to a structural challenge that we face by being located in Aalborg, while the main job market for international studies students is located in Copenhagen. It is therefore very difficult for our students to find relevant study jobs locally, and the internships become their best opportunity for cultivating a network and gaining relevant experience.

When we compared the graduate survey with the internship evaluations, it became apparent that there is also a discrepancy between the type of internships our students engage in and the jobs they find after graduation. Whereas the internships are very often directly related to the main subject areas of the study program, the first jobs are perhaps a bit more pragmatic and less related to international studies. The primary job functions of the interns are communication and fund raising, while the recent graduates list administration and project management as their primary tasks.

### From the student interviews

During the focus group interviews, it became apparent that the students themselves place a great stress on the internships. Several students said they had chosen the program specifically to be allowed to do an internship, and for the students who had already completed the internship it was clear that the experience had in many ways been formative. There were, however, several ways we as a study program could support them better.

First of all, finding an internship was very difficult. Some students ended up paying agencies to find an internship for them; others took internships with dodgy NGOs, where the interns had to pay for the position and where there were few or no staff members to supervise them. Yet others ended in positions where their labor was exploited and working conditions were less than optimal. The students did not mind long hours and hard work as long as they felt that the work was 'real' and relevant. Fortunately, most students were very happy with their internship placements and considered the internship period a formative experience.

Secondly, they felt they lacked practical guidance from the university/the study program. While finding an internship is of course the students' own responsibility, the whole application process was made unnecessarily complicated by the lack of precise information from the study program. When asked whether they had participated in activities arranged by the IO or AAU Career, most students said they had not been aware of these offerings.

Finally, the students who had already completed the internship semester wished that there had been a closer linkage between the internship and the project they were asked to write during the internship. In the international studies program, the students have to write a regular project at the end of the internship period, and sometimes they felt that this project resembled other semester projects too much. Also, it could

sometimes be very difficult for them to find time to write the project while working 50 hours a week, and it would have been a bit easier, if the project had been more directly related to their internship.

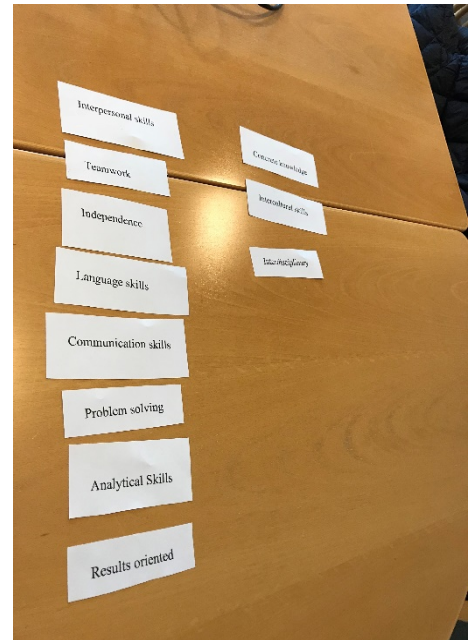
### The host interviews

We were received very enthusiastically by the internship hosts. Some of them also host interns from University Colleges and were used to a much closer collaboration with the study programs, but they had never been contacted directly by the university before. They were very enthusiastic about our students and would for the most part be willing to engage more directly with the study program. They also appreciated help in interpreting the content of the study programs – and course titles, which were immediately understandable rather than either too vague or too specific for them to understand.

During the interviews, we also asked the internship hosts about their knowledge of the PBL-principles. It was quite apparent that awareness of the PBL method is very much a local phenomenon – only the internship hosts located in Aalborg or with a previous connection to AAU knew about this.

We also asked the hosts which competencies they value most highly in an intern. We used flashcards listing various competencies and asked the interviewees to rank them. In the ensuing discussions, it became apparent that these competencies were interpreted completely differently by different hosts. And that abilities which some hosts would class as interpersonal skills, others would describe as communication skills or even intercultural skills.

The hosts we interviewed were all extremely engaged in creating a good internship experience for the students. They were very aware that the internship had to be a learning experience, that the students needed supervision. While they rarely hired their interns afterwards, they often deliberately included their former interns in their own network, and kept in touch with them after the internship had formally ended.



### Conclusions

This project has proved to be extremely beneficial for staff members, students and the DIR Study Board. It provided us with the opportunity to understand more about the internships semester and look for new ways in which we could both improve it and also enhance the opportunities and chances for our students to gain relevant employment when they graduate. The research revealed that while the internship semester is very beneficial for our students who find excellent placements all around the world, we are also not maximising the potential of this semester. We believe that by a number of small changes such as re-evaluating how to use the internship project as well further incorporating AAUs PBL competencies in this semester, we will be able to help students develop the key competencies needed for the competitive job market. Interviewing the internship hosts also highlighted how important our project management course is for providing students

with some practical skills ready for the internship and revealed a number of areas which need to be incorporated into the course in the future.

As regards the three challenges identified in the framework above, our project found that the study board needs more precise knowledge about the linkage between the study program and the job market. We found that most of our students succeed in finding internships within the fields we identify as core professions: International organizations, NGOs, Embassies, and various EU offices. However, there is a gap between their internships and their first jobs, as finding regular employment within this sector is very challenging.

It is therefore crucial that we help our students translate their competencies and employability skills into language that is immediately understandable to potential employers. This was especially apparent through the interviews we did with the internship hosts, and their very different interpretation of apparently simple concepts such as like interpersonal or intercultural skills. We found that focusing first on the period where students look for internships and write applications, and later on the internship project itself, would provide the study program with concrete opportunities to help the students identify their marketable and employability related competencies.

We believe that by a number of small changes such as re-evaluating how to use the internship project as well further incorporating AAUs PBL competencies in the internship semester, we will be able to help students develop the key competencies needed for the competitive job market. Interviewing the internship hosts also highlighted how important our project management course is for providing students with some practical skills ready for the internship and revealed a number of areas which need to be incorporated into the study program in the future.

## Recommendations

### 1. Information for the students

- Enhanced visibility of existing support! (AAU Career, AAU Innovation & IO): While support is available for students from a number of institutions at Aalborg University, very few students were aware of these facilities. Therefore, it is vital that these are brought to the attention of students during the 7<sup>th</sup> semester so that they are able to take full advantage of them and use them to gain internships as well as future employment.
- Rewriting the internship guidelines: Through the interviews with the students, it became clear that information regarding internships is quite difficult to navigate for the students, as they have to deal with both the study program, and the IO or AAU Career depending on where their internship is located. The internship handbook from the study program needs to be re-written to provide concise, relevant and up-to-date information, minimizing confusion about procedures and regulations, thereby making it easier to focus on finding an academically relevant internship.
- Moodle: Study Boards should explore how they can further use Moodle to help students identify and translate the key PLB competencies they develop while they are on their internships and also find relevant internships.
- Stressing the importance of volunteering as a way to get experience: Bringing in NGOs from the local community and providing students with the opportunity to network with relevant

people during the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> semester will help students gain access to relevant work experience during the studies and also highlight the importance of using this time to advance their CVs and gain valuable skills.



## 2. Information meetings

- Career day 7<sup>th</sup> Semester: Internships and volunteer experiences make candidates more competitive in the job market. Therefore, putting internships and volunteering at the centre of careers day is vital. As part of the Career Day this year, presentations were made by local NGOs, AAU Innovation, people working in non-traditional careers, staff and former students.
- Information meeting 8<sup>th</sup> semester: Creating time for students to ask practical questions is equally as important in creating network opportunities for them. This year, a Q&A session was included in the students' timetable where they were able to discuss among themselves their concerns and hopes about the internship semester and also ask staff any questions regarding any the practical details.

## 3. Revised curriculum

- New type of internship project – PBL competencies: The Study Board will re-evaluate how to use the internship project as well as how to further incorporate AAUs PBL competencies in this semester. The internship project is a great opportunity for students develop meta-cognitive competencies, one of the four PBL competencies identified by the PBL Academy.
- Project management and international organisations: It is very clear that the project management course is very important for preparing our students for both the internship and the world of work. Therefore, the syllabus must reflect the skills that potential employers are looking for and be used as an opportunity for students to gain these practical and theoretical tools.