

VIRTUAL INTERNATIONAL INTERNSHIPS IN AN ONLINE INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS PROGRAM

Marvee Marr
Ashford University
marvee.marr@ashford.edu

ABSTRACT

The changing nature and platform of education, has led to new demands and challenges in the industry. As the pendulum swings to more flexible and condensed courses and programs, many students are turning to online education for their academic needs. While the last few years have seen a decline in college enrollment overall, online enrollment numbers have had a steady increase (Allen & Seaman, 2017). Thus, as online education increases in popularity and numbers, educators struggle with innovative methods to ensure that online graduates experience a comprehensive education and are prepared for the job market. One such innovative idea is experiential learning in the form of virtual internships. In particular, this paper investigates the concept of virtual international internships in regard to adding value to students majoring in International Business in an online environment.

INCREASE OF ONLINE EDUCATION

According to a study by Babson Survey Research Group (2017), online enrollment increased at a faster rate between 2015 and 2016 when compared to the three previous years. Furthermore, data from a survey of more than 4,700 US colleges and universities, reported that 6.3 million students, mostly undergraduates, took one or more online courses in the Fall semester of 2016. These numbers reflect a 5.6 percent increase over 2015 online enrollment numbers. This incline in enrollment of online programs and courses has been a steady trend for over a decade. The Babson Group has reported such growth in online enrollment for the last 14 consecutive years (Friedman, 2018).

Further studies and research have concurred with the Babson group survey. According to a study conducted by Bestcolleges.com (2018), the demand for online education continues to increase in the US. The survey revealed that 99% of higher education administrators had reported an increased demand for online courses. The study also reported that 73% of schools plan to offer online programs for possible enrollment growth, while 68% plan to increase online opportunities in response to employment demand. In addition, 40% of the administrators that responded to the survey plan to increase their budget for online programs in 2019 (Bestcolleges.com, 2018).

Lastly, the study by Bestcolleges.com (2018), disclosed that the age of online students is declining. "34% of schools surveyed reported an increase in traditional college students, ages 18-25, including first-semester "freshmen, and younger students concurrently enrolled in high school and college courses" (Bestcolleges.com, 2018, p.1). With the online student age decreasing, and with more traditional college students in the online environment, the need for experiential learning, such as internships has become even more crucial to student success.

THE CASE FOR INTERNSHIPS

The competitive nature of the job market for recent college graduates has created the need for students to showcase their talents and brand themselves to stand out from their peers. Internships have historically, and still do, create such an opportunity for students to enter the marketplace with a competitive advantage.

A 2011 survey conducted by Internships.com, which polled more than 7,300 recent graduates and alumni, and human resources professionals, reported that "internships truly have become the "new interview" in the job search process for students and employers alike," (Smith, 2012). Many talent-driven, "high-quality organizations use an internship program as a strategic talent pipeline - a way of identifying and vetting prospective candidates for entry-level professional positions"(Jones, 2017, p.1). Additionally, a 2012 study reported that 69% of small or medium enterprises (SME) hired their interns into full-time positions after graduation (Worthum, 2013).

VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS

"Remote internships often entail working on research projects or social media efforts, for which only a laptop and an Internet connection are needed. They make sense in a world of global companies and virtual work forces laboring from afar," (Worthum, 2013). With the increase of remote and offsite work and the importance of internships as a competitive advantage for the job market, it stands to reason that virtual internship numbers would be on the rise. In addition, the development and use of technology in education and enterprises have boosted virtual work. "Virtual internships are rising in popularity, along with improvements in online collaboration technology and the increasing use of social media platforms." (Benefits of International Internship Programs, 2012, p.2).

A 2012 survey reported that more than 70% of college students showed interest in obtaining a virtual internship, while 33 percent of employers hired virtual internships in 2011 (Smith, 2012). Internships.com's survey of over 300 employers discovered that about a third of responding companies offered remote internships in 2013. The survey further stated that they saw a 20 percent increase of virtual internships from 2011 to 2012 (Worthum, 2013). In a time when communication, task, and projects can be

completed via technology from across the globe, virtual internship demand will continue to rise.

As time and location are no longer barriers when considering an educational program, thanks to the rise of virtual internships, neither are experiential learning. In addition, there are a hosts of advantages for such internships. Virtual internships offer the flexibility of working from home, or anywhere with a stable internet connection, therefore ideal for students juggling classes and extracurricular commitments (Jobs & Internships for College Students and Recent Grads | WayUp, 2018). For employers, virtual internships offer flexibility, cost savings and a larger talent pool (Benefits of International Internship Programs, 2012).

While Virtual internships are diverse, some positions lend themselves to remote work better than others. "Positions in social media, content writing, and graphic design, for example, are a great fit for virtual interns who want the experience without the confines of an office space" (Jobs & Internships for College Students and Recent Grads | WayUp, 2018).

INTERNATIONAL VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS

As virtual internships do not require the student to be in a specific location, virtual international internships are the logical next step. According to Kättröm, Kristensen & Svenkerud, 2007, "Learning mobility, i.e. transnational mobility for the purpose of acquiring new skills is one of the fundamental ways in which individuals, particularly young people, can strengthen their future employability as well as their personal development." As face to face international internships are plagued with high cost and location issues, virtual international internships eliminate such issues. In fact, the concept of virtual mobility defined as "cross-border, collaborative experiences in a context of teaching and/or learning," is gaining popularity on a global scale (Kättröm, Kristensen & Svenkerud, 2007.)

Start-ups and smaller firms are the forerunners in recognizing the benefits that come from global virtual internship programs, as students increasingly pursue opportunities to gain practical workplace experience (Benefits of International Internship Programs, 2012). Virtual international internships provide elevated experiential learning opportunities for students while in turn, provides the prospect for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to talent and cultural exchanges. For example, "a virtual internship program forged international connections between a Peace Corps volunteer, a faculty member and students at Kaplan University, School of Information Technology" (Selby & Frieswyk, 2013.) Programs such as this one allow for non-traditional adult students to maintain their responsibilities, such as family and work while working on projects in other countries virtually (Selby & Frieswyk, 2013). "This program has led to increased student confidence in their skillsets as they continued to develop their assigned projects for the NGO. They also gained exposure to cultural diversity and international collaboration atypical of your average IT class" (Selby & Frieswyk, 2013).

The increase of virtual internships in the academic realm has the possibility to help develop student confidence and build relationships and networking opportunities (Roy & Sykes, 2017). Furthermore, real-world experiences, via virtual internships, can prove to be a competitive advantage benefit to online students in that it allows students the opportunity to build communication skills, professionalism and earn experience in their field of study. For students studying international business in an online environment, the opportunity to earn experience in a global company or a company in another country, without the cost of going abroad, is invaluable. Incorporating a virtual international internship into an online International Business program could prove to be a value-adding component that helps enable students to reach their full potential.

REFERENCES

- Benefits of an International Virtual Internship Program. (2012, March 02). Retrieved October 28, 2018, from <http://jumpstart-hr.com/benefits-of-an-international-virtual-internship-program/>.
- Bestcolleges.com (Ed.). (2018, June 27). Annual Trends in Online Education Report. Retrieved October 27, 2018, from <https://www.bestcolleges.com/perspectives/annual-trends-in-online-education/>.
- Bushouse, B. K. (2005). Community Nonprofit Organizations and Service-Learning: Resource Constraints to Building Partnerships with Universities. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 32-40.
- Colby, A., & Sullivan, W. M. (2009). Strengthening the foundations of students' excellence, integrity, and social contribution. *Liberal Education*, 22-29.
- Cress, C. M. (2004). Critical thinking development in service-learning activities: Pedagogical implications for critical being and action. *Inquiry: Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines*, 87-93.
- Friedman, J. (2018, January 11). Study Says Enrollment in Online Courses Is Rising. Retrieved October 29, 2018, from <https://www.usnews.com/higher-education/online-education/articles/2018-01-11/study-more-students-are-enrolling-in-online-courses>.
- Jones, J. (2017, November 13). How Valuable Are Internships To College Students' Future Careers? Retrieved November 5, 2018, from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/quora/2017/11/13/how-valuable-are-internships-to-college-students-future-careers/#799d58061b14>.
- Jobs & Internships for College Students and Recent Grads | WayUp. (2018). Retrieved October 18, 2018, from <https://www.wayup.com/s/internships/virtual/>.
- Roy, J., & Sykes, D. (2017). A Review of Internship Opportunities in Online Learning: Building a New Conceptual Framework for a Self-Regulated Internship in Hospitality. *International Journal of E-Learning and Distance Education*, 32(1), 1-18. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1154622.pdf>.
- Selby, A., & Frieswyk, J. (2013, September 18). Retrieved October 28, 2018, from https://secure.onlinelearningconsortium.org/effective_practices/international-collaboration-virtual-internships.
- Smith, J. (2012, December 06). Internships May Be The Easiest Way To A Job In 2013. Retrieved September 18, 2017, from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jacquelynsmith/2012/12/06/internships-may-be-the-easiest-way-to-a-job-in-2013/#3f34bcd14dca>
- Wortham, J. (2013, February 02). Virtually There: Working Remotely. Retrieved September 27, 2017, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/03/education/edlife/virtual-internships.html?mcubz=0>