

Stakeholder Summary

Ontario postsecondary internship programs should emphasize educational quality

There is significant variation in the structure of internship programs offered in Ontario's colleges and universities – from length of program to requirements for completion. But a new study from the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQCO) also finds that when viewed through the lens of experiential learning theory, most of the internships fall short on linking internship practice with classroom learning.

Project description

The study, *What is an internship? An inventory and analysis of "internship" opportunities available to Ontario postsecondary students*, explored internship opportunities offered by direct-entry programmes (e.g., undergraduate degree or diploma) in Ontario postsecondary institutions. Data on 369 internship programs were collected from the websites of Ontario's 44 postsecondary colleges and universities. Outlines for 77 of the programs were also collected and examined in the context of David A. Kolb's four-stage experiential learning theory, which says that an optimal learning experience should include concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation.

Findings

Substantial variation was found in college and university internship programs within and across academic disciplines, according to the study, including educational activities, prerequisites, length of program, fees, salaries and requirements for completion. For example, internship salaries ranged from zero to more than \$60,000; the number of hours required for internship completion ranged from 10 to 1,000; while internship durations ranged from one month to 16 months.

Most of the internship outlines fell short on some educational elements when Kolb's experiential learning theory was considered. Although the learning activities offered opportunities for concrete experience and reflective observation, the authors said there were insufficient opportunities for abstract conceptualization and active experimentation, citing a lack of emphasis on linking the internship practice with classroom learning and an overemphasis on the practical level of the experience.

Recommendations/Further research

Noting that "the conditions for optimal learning are not currently being met within most Ontario higher education internship programs," the authors recommend that internship programs establish explicit learning activities that are grounded in each stage of Kolb's experiential learning theory, such as gaining hands-on practice, opportunities for reflection and drawing connections between coursework and the internship experience.

Clear roles and responsibilities should be established for students, institutions and employers involved in the internship. Institutions should outline learning objectives and outcomes and create activities that

promote intersection between the internship and coursework. Employers should monitor these activities and provide feedback to the student throughout the internship, while students should maintain communication between themselves and the stakeholders and fulfill expectations of the program.

The authors also recommend that internship programs focus on educational quality, establishing standards that can be monitored and maintained. They call for the creation and evaluation of an internship program toolkit that would provide stakeholders with samples of course content, best-practice guidelines and learning activity templates.

HEQCO has conducted a number of studies on work-integrated learning (WIL), which includes internships and co-op programs, and will publish a final study on WIL student outcomes later this year. Overall, the studies have shown that [institutions and employers](#) believe WIL prepares students to enter the labour market with relevant, transferable and marketable skills, that [faculty](#) with WIL experience want even more of it available to students and employers, that a [key challenge](#) is aligning the supply of WIL opportunities to growing demand, and that nearly half of students with no WIL experience [would pursue a WIL option](#) if they could start their postsecondary education over again.

Authors of *What is an internship? An inventory and analysis of "internship" opportunities available to Ontario postsecondary students* are Ashley Stirling, Gretchen Kerr, Jenessa Banwell, Ellen MacPherson, Ahad Bandealy, and Anthony Battaglia, University of Toronto.