

DEVELOPING AND MANAGING INTERNSHIP PROGRAMS IN A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION: THE CASE OF JURAJ DOBRILA UNIVERSITY OF PULA

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Abstract

Internship enables students dig deeper into the real business world and enriches their studying experience. Internship programs are valuable to both students and organizations. At one side students get valuable skills and competences that build their employability, apply theoretical knowledge in practice and learn more about their profession. Business organizations have the possibility to reach the pool of human resources – possible future employees. In many scientific institutions in Croatia, such as universities and faculties, internship has not been integrated within the undergraduate and/or graduate study programs as a regular course required for graduation. This activity is more practiced in colleges and private higher educational institutions that offer professional study programs. However, things started to change recently pushed by the real sector that lacks human resources (particularly in tourism) and external environment (i.e. EU funds that focus on human resources and upgrade of skills and competences).

The purpose of this research is to analyse experiences of graduates of interdisciplinary study program Culture and Tourism concerning their internship practice and to get feedback from the real sector on the organized internship programs. In order to obtain results authors have conducted a survey using a questionnaire on the sample of 78 graduates (alumni students) and 89 industry representatives. The questionnaire was distributed by e-mail.

Results have shown that students value internship program and consider it useful but suggest more internship hours and stronger cooperation between university and the industry. On the other side, industry representatives believe internship programs help students in developing their relationship and responsibility towards future jobs. However, they strongly support the views that cooperation between industry and academia is of extreme importance and are willing to cooperate on various levels and ways. At the end of the paper authors list suggestions for future development and management of internship program in a higher education institution.

Keywords: internship programs, management, cooperation, industry, academia.

1 INTRODUCTION

The VUCA (short for volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) world surrounding different organizations and other actors affects the way they deal with constant changes, uncertainty, multi-layered problems and challenges and the ability to determine anything for everything being basically unclear. Educational institutions are not excluded and have to deal with it. They have to adapt their study programs and the outcomes of their study programs based on the global changes and challenges in their external environment. When it comes to students, they must be aware that theoretical knowledge acquired during their study is no longer enough to compete professionally and to successfully enter the professional market or the real business world. On the other side, the industry or the real sector is lacking human resources of appropriate skills and can thus, benefit, from connecting and collaborating with the educational institutions and students directly.

If higher educational institutions want to accommodate their study programs to the labour market needs, thus avoiding failures in teaching useful job skills, it is essential for them to collaborate with the real sector. One way to do so is to introduce internship component so that their students can gain experiences whilst working in an organization. Furco [1] believes that the goal of internship is engaging students in learning activities for providing them with hands-on experiences that strengthen their understanding or skills within their fields of study. One of the early studies on internship has emphasized internship as a sensitive pedagogical tool that provides critical experience to students [2].

Benefits of internship are not solely related to students but educational institutions and industry as well. Students can gain the following benefits by completing an internship program [3][4][5]: (1) make contacts and networks with the industry that increases their opportunity for finding employment; (2) enrich their curriculum vitae so that students can stand out to different potential employers; (3) apply their theoretical knowledge in the real world; (4) help them narrow the list of their possible future career choice and explore their career path. So, students get – obviously – lots of practical experiences during internship [6] but internship also impacts on their professional growth [7]. Some of the researches also point to another benefit related to getting better-quality jobs much quicker [8] or improvement of student's soft skills [9]. Internship experience improves job performance, shortens the duration to find a job and enhanced wages and job satisfaction [10]. This was further proved in a more recent study on the sample of Spanish students. The results of this study showed that internship experience facilitates the university-to-work transition in the short run (first employment after graduation) but with weak evidence of positive effects on matching four years after graduation [11]. Some analyses have proved that those students who perform an internship have greater job stability in their early careers [12] as well as achieve significantly higher job satisfaction [5]. Higher educational institutions strengthen their reputation [13] and attractiveness. Collaborating with employers allows universities to increase the relevance of their programs and to implement them effectively. The literature underlines several benefits of internship for the industry. For instance, social networks [14] were mentioned as useful for sharing knowledge for entrepreneurs being able to determine ideal opportunities and benefit from accessing human resources of the required knowledge and skills. There are many others as pointed by Loretto [15]: (1) interns give a fresh perspective because do not perceive company from the inside but from the outside; (2) enhance organizational social strategy for being tech-savvy that may directly benefit organization's social presence; (3) interns may become entry-level hires; (4) can provide an extra set of hands that may foster the quicker way of resolving a problem or finalizing a project; (5) many employees may get the mentorship opportunity and this positively impacts organization's culture and can even multiply effective leadership because it provides mentors with the opportunity to share and revise their own knowledge. Jawabri [16] summarized seven determinants of internship effectiveness: (1) working environment (learning opportunities, career development opportunities support from on site supervisors and co-workers, organizational satisfaction and opportunities to form networks); (2) academic preparedness (the ability to apply the theoretical knowledge gained in the university to internship); (3) self-initiatives (interns that have positive expectations from their internship program are more likely to be more satisfied with their internship); (4) challenge on job (there is a need to allocate enough challenging tasks so that the intern is able to exhibit his/her skills sufficiently); (5) effectiveness of supervision (appropriate supervision and support is needed to support interns in successful task completion and to strengthen their satisfaction); (6) task clarity; (7) compensation (although it may result in higher positive experience it has still not been proved that compensation impacts internship experience). The same author summarized the outcomes of internship effectiveness: better career, academic performance and degree completion. The findings of the study conducted by Hergert [17] indicate that students allocate a considerable value on the internship experience and this is much correlated with their future expectations when it comes to career goals. However, the value of internship would augment if educators would provide the appropriate structure and integrate the experience with the academic background of the student.

In scientific institutions in Croatia, such as universities and faculties, internship has not been sufficiently integrated within the undergraduate and/or graduate study programs as a regular course required for graduation. This activity was more practiced in colleges and private higher educational institutions that offer professional study programs. Things started to change recently pushed by the real sector that lacks human resources (particularly in tourism) and external environment (i.e. EU funds that focus on human resources and upgrade of skills and competences). The mentioned was confirmed in the study on internship and higher education conducted by the Ministry of Science and Education [18] that indicated an analysis of the representation and quality of professional practice and other forms of learning through work in study programs conducted at higher education institutions. Authors underline several key points of the study:

- Professional practice (internship) is most common in integrated undergraduate and graduate studies, i.e undergraduate professional studies
- Internship is least represented in the case of undergraduate university studies
- No matter how many programs a university has, approximately half of the programs run at the university have some form of professional practice out of which 48% is compulsory

- The practice at most universities is more represented in professional study programs than in university programs
- The professional practice is more represented in private (professional programs) compared to public institutions
- The professional practice is on university programs (and according to the share of programs and according to the share of students) most represented in the field of biomedicine and health, respectively biotechnical sciences
- Internship is the least represented in the field of humanities
- 50% of study programs in social sciences offer internship opportunities as well as 61% in interdisciplinary sciences
- Average duration of internship is 120 hours/year.

Overall, this study indicated that Croatia lags behind developed economies in the area of cooperation between the scientific and business communities.

The purpose of this research is to analyse internship practice and enlighten key points for managing internship programs and customizing them further to meet the needs and interests of both – students and industry.

The aim is twofold:

- 1 To assess attitudes, opinions and positive and negative experiences graduates of the interdisciplinary study program Culture and Tourism had during their internship hours that were offered as a regular and compulsory course (internship) during one semester of their undergraduate study (required for graduation);
- 2 To get feedback from the real sector on the organized internship programs, possibilities for improvements and students' benefits.

In order to obtain results, one hundred questionnaires were sent by e-mail to graduate students and one hundred questionnaires to representatives of the business sector. Authors got back 78 completed questionnaires from graduates (alumni students) and 89 completed questionnaires from business representatives (entrepreneurs). Results have shown that students value internship program and consider it useful but suggest more internship hours and stronger cooperation between university and the industry. On the other side, industry representatives believe internship programs help students in developing their relationship and responsibility towards future jobs. However, they strongly support the views that cooperation between industry and academia is of extreme importance and are willing to cooperate on various levels and ways. At the end of the paper authors list suggestions for future development, quality improvement and management of internship program in a higher education institution.

2 METHODOLOGY

An online questionnaire that consisted of close-ended and open-ended questions (used for suggestions mostly) was used and distributed directly to e-mails of graduated students of Culture and Tourism master study program and entrepreneurs in the sector of cultural and creative industries and tourism. The questionnaire was designed based on the results of an extensive literature review, taking similar research into consideration and conducting a workshop with 10 students of Culture and Tourism and 5 employers from tourism, cultural and creative industries.

One hundred questionnaires were sent by e-mail to graduate students and one hundred questionnaires to representatives of the business sector. Authors got back 78 completed questionnaires from graduates (alumni students) and 89 completed questionnaires from business representatives (entrepreneurs). Hence, the response rate was 78% and 89% respectively. Out 78 graduated students 89,74% were women and 10,26% men of average age between 25-34 (70,51%). Most of them (65,38%) have their residence in Istria county (one of 21 counties of the Republic of Croatia). Almost half of them (48,71%) graduated in 2019 and 2020. 70,51% of graduated students were employed at the time of conducting this research. 43,64% of them were employed in the cultural, creative industries or tourism. Most of them were employed in tourism (29,09%). Other graduated students were employed outside the mentioned sectors/industries.

Entrepreneurs were selected based on their core business activity in the field of cultural and creative industries and tourism. Students of Culture and Tourism opt to find jobs in these industries and the study program is tailored to meet the needs of entrepreneurs operating in these sectors. Furthermore, learning outcomes of the mentioned study program are focused on operationalization of the necessary competencies for easier approach and future workplace challenges. The sample of entrepreneurs consisted those from public (51,69%), private (33,71%) and civil sectors (11,24%) as well as those that represent a public-private partnership (3,37%). 70% of respondents were women and 30% were man.

This study was conducted during February 2021.

Authors based the research methodology following similar approaches in other researches investigating the same/similar topics. For instance, similar study that evaluated the impact of internship programs was conducted in Pakistan by Anjum [19]. The study used structured questionnaire (35 close-ended questions assessed using 5-point Likert scale). Internship experiences were also evaluated in the study of Jung and Lee [10]. Positive and negative aspects of internship were also analysed in the study of Mala, Akash and Jewel [20] using an online survey.

Four hypotheses of the research:

- 1 Internship is appreciated by students.
- 2 Internship duration has to be longer.
- 3 Internship should be offered to students throughout the entire study program.
- 4 Internship should be co-financed by the state.

3 RESULTS

In the following section authors will present and discuss results of the research in relation with assessing attitudes, experiences and opinions of graduates and employers toward internship.

3.1 Assessing attitudes, experiences and opinions of graduates

Graduated students were asked to determine their level of satisfaction with the current job on the five-point Likert scale scored from 1 (strongly dissatisfied) to 5 (strongly satisfied). The average job satisfaction is 3,85 (mean score). Overall, there are 21,82% of graduated students are extremely satisfied with their current job and 56,36% who are satisfied meaning that 78% of graduated students could be considered satisfied with their current job. 30% of those unemployed graduated students believe these are the main reasons for a such unpleasant situation:

- 1 Covid-19 crises that hit so hard the tourism sector and cultural and creative industries (56,52%)
- 2 Getting a job is all about “who you know” otherwise chances of landing a job are nonexistent (52,17%)
- 3 It is hard to find a job in tourism and cultural and creative industries (47,83%)
- 4 Missing competences that labor market needs (34,78%)
- 5 Just graduated (17,39%).

48,05% of respondents had the internship opportunity as internship, as a regular and compulsory course, was introduced in 2019 only or has the opportunity to work during their study. Other had no such experiences. 14 close-ended questions using five-point Likert scale scored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) were prepared to analyze the internship and work experience of those graduated students that has such an experience. Results are presented in the “Fig.1”.

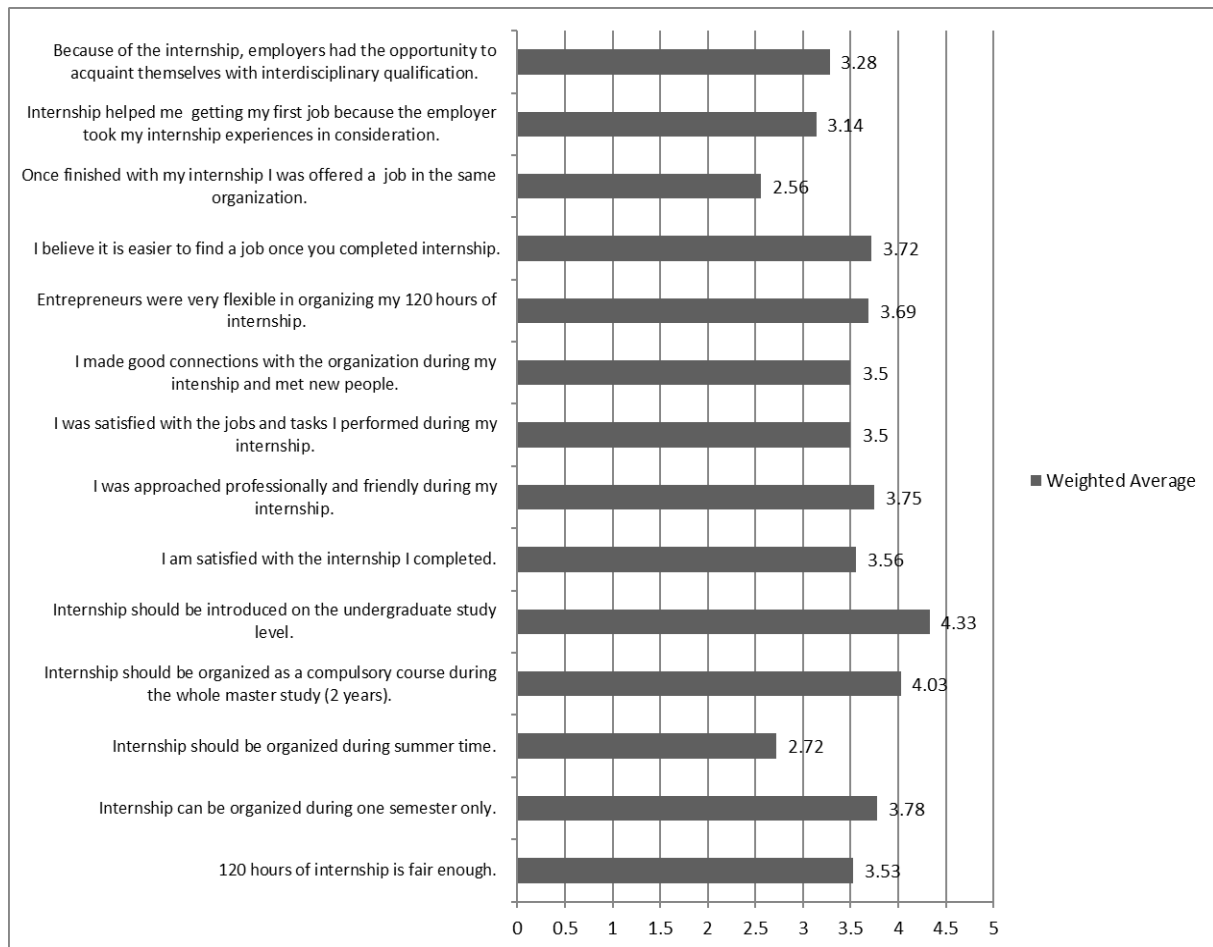


Figure 1. Internship perception of graduated students of Culture and Tourism study program

It is interesting to observe that more than 90% of graduated students share the opinion that internship should be introduced on the undergraduate study level whilst 77,78% of them believe internship should also be compulsory on the graduate study level (both years). Overall, 58,55% of respondents were satisfied with internship. The mentioned proves the hypothesis number 1. Authors were keen to investigate the factors influencing their overall satisfaction with internship. The following were highlighted as the three most important:

- 1 Acquiring of new skills and competencies (61,11%)
- 2 Understanding the way an organization operates (58,33%)
- 3 Networking opportunities (38,89%).

As mentioned earlier there were respondents who had no internship opportunities during their study. Authors were also keen to get their opinion on the internship during study. 95% of those respondents agree that internship is a valuable component of the study program because in such a way students would be able to acquire valuable skills and competences they require for the future (95%) and to implement theoretical knowledge in the real organization (98%). 7 close-ended questions using five-point Likert scale scored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) were prepared to analyze the opinion of graduates who had no internship opportunity during their study. "Fig. 2" summarizes results.

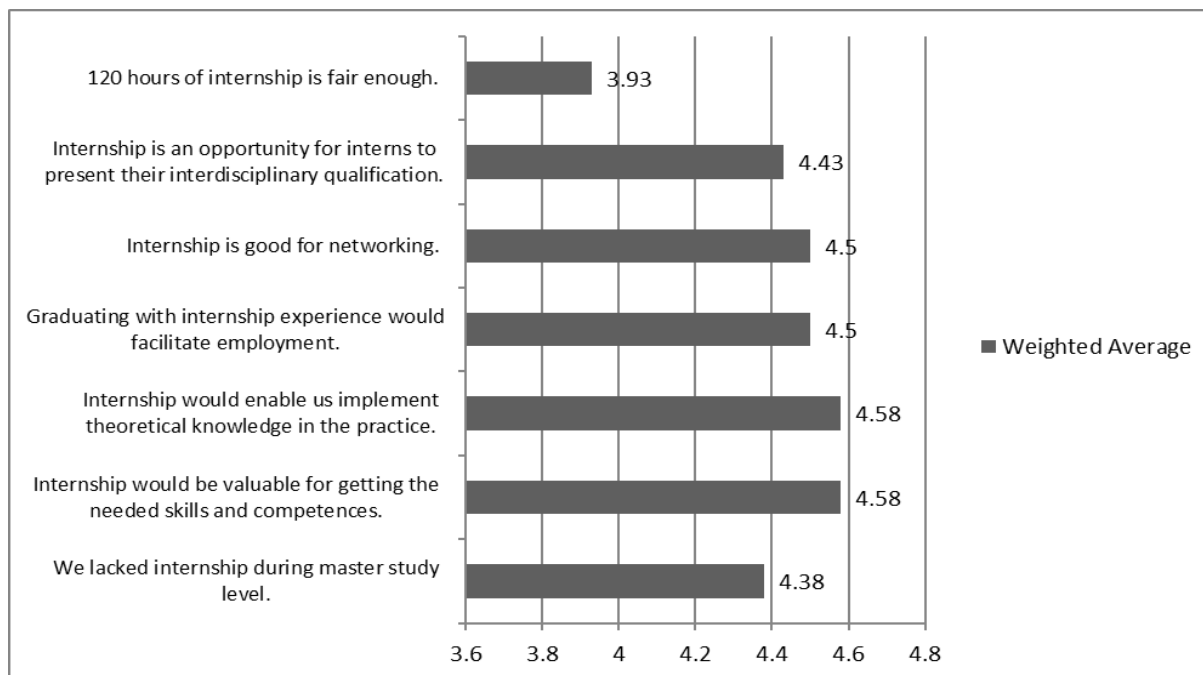


Figure 2. Internship perception of graduated students of Culture and Tourism study program who had no internship opportunity

A mean Likert score of 4,38 was given to the dimension of “lacking internship” that shows the importance respondents allocate to compulsory internship during study. A mean Likert score of 4,58 was allocated to the dimension “acquiring valuable skills and competences during internship” that is aligned with literature and similar studies.

3.2 Assessing opinions and experiences of employers toward internship

Authors wanted to dig deeper and explore the following:

- 1 the level of satisfaction of employers with interns
- 2 the level of satisfaction of employers with the level of acquired theoretical knowledge of interns that could be applied in the practice
- 3 the level of students’ motivation and their engagement

5 close-ended questions using five-point Likert scale scored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) were prepared to analyze the opinion of employers on the above mentioned.

Table 1: Opinion of the employers.

	OPINION	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
1.	We are satisfied with interns.	3,73
2.	We are satisfied with the level of acquired theoretical knowledge of interns that can be applied in practice.	3,37
3.	Interns are sufficiently motivated.	3,37
4.	Interns very responsibly perform the daily tasks.	3,58
5.	We get the impression that interns are doing an internship just to fulfill their obligation.	2,88

Source: author’s research

66,27% of employers are satisfied with interns. 56% of them share the opinion that interns do responsibly perform their daily tasks and jobs during internship. In this study, all of the dimensions explored from the side/perspective of employers related to their satisfaction with interns and their interns’ motivation received a mean Likert score of ≥ 3.51 . Two dimensions – satisfaction with interns and responsible task

performance – were identified as significant in determining internship motivation and the justification of introducing internship in the curriculum.

The following chart shows the answers to the question why is it important for employers for students to go on a professional internship?

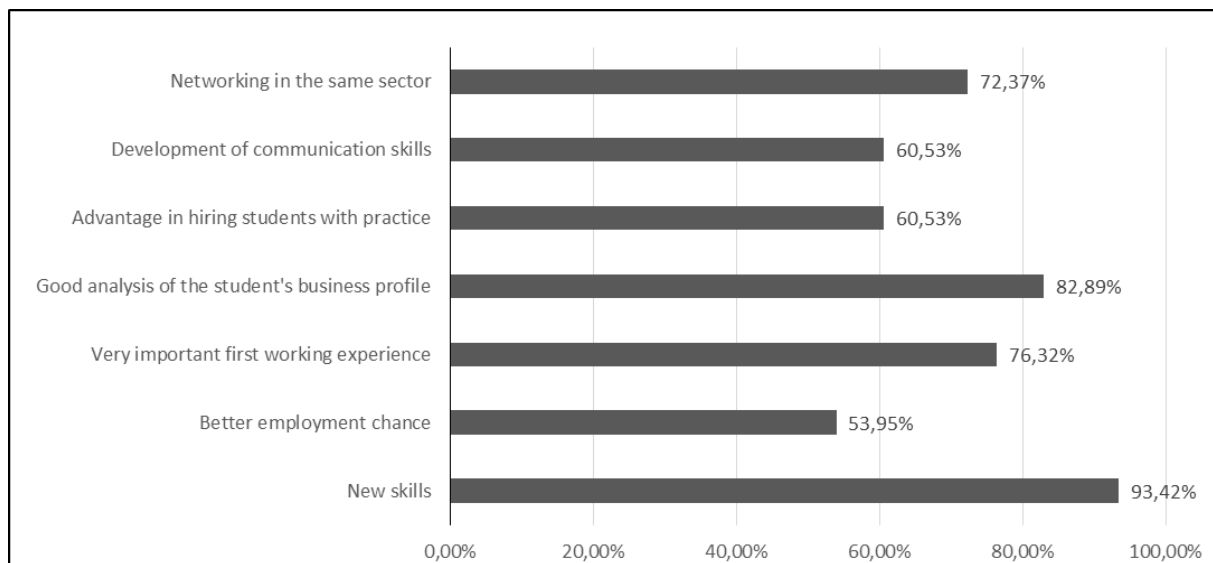


Figure 3. Employer's opinion on the importance of the internship

“Fig. 3” shows that employers believe internship is very important for students, primarily due to the acquisition of new skills and analysis of the student's business profile as a potential employee. They also believe that through internship they can achieve first work experience and better connect with people in the same sector.

The following “Fig. 4” shows how much employers agree on certain views regarding internship.

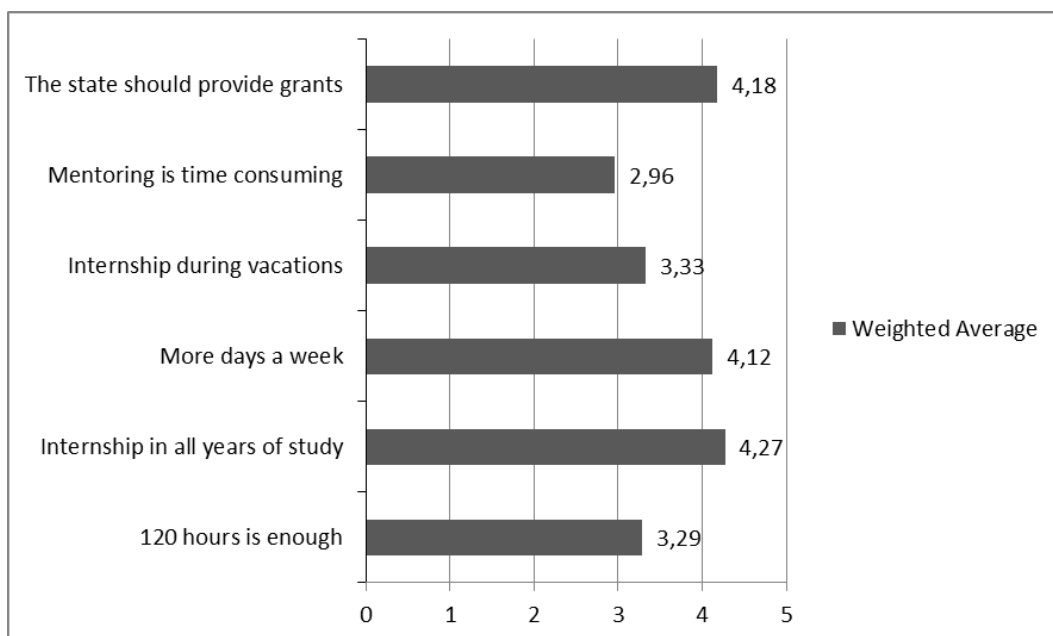


Figure 4. Attitudes of employers

The “Fig. 4” shows that employers agree with the statement that the internship should be organized continuously in each year of study, that the state should co-finance it and that it should be organized several times a week. The least important thing for them is the time they spend mentoring students. A very high mean Likert score of 4,27 was given to the dimension of “internship duration – during the whole

study program” that much corresponds with the views of students – both those that had the internship opportunity and those who hadn’t. This proves the hypothesis number 2 as well as number 3. Employers associated a high mean Likert score of 4,18 to the dimension of “state support in terms of grants” that proved the hypothesis number 5.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The following is a brief outline of the importance of internship and the limitations that the authors had during the research in this paper.

4.1 The future of internship and characteristics of effective internship structure

There is the utmost need to adapt study programs to the needs of the labour market and changes in the environment. According to the World Economic Forum’s Future of Jobs Report up to 50% of all employees will need reskilling by 2025 for technological disruptions [21]. So, top ten skills of 2025 will be [21]: analytical thinking and innovation, active learning and learning strategies, complex problem-solving, critical thinking and analyses, creativity, originality and initiative, leadership and social influence, technology use, monitoring and control, technology design and programming, resilience, stress tolerance and flexibility, reasoning, problem solving and ideation. It should be in the best interest for higher educational institutions to design and adapt study programs, to reskill and upskill students so that they prepare them for the jobs of the future. Based on the analysed literature and research results students confirmed they are very interested in internship and have recognized its benefits. They further confirmed that internship should be organized at undergraduate study level not only master level. Employers share exactly the same opinion. In order to improve the quality of internship, employers are almost unanimous that internship should be co-financed by the state. On the other side, students had no comments on the same. They do not hesitate to work for free if this is a compulsory part of their study program. Finding and retaining skilled and high-quality workforce in tourism, cultural and creative industries is far from being characterized as simple and easy. These industries, particularly tourism face very high turnover rate. Looking this way, it would be smart from the state to provide grants as a way of support to entrepreneurs who engage students in internship so that they could than be able to pay interns for the work they have done. Organizations and higher educational institutions should work together on the structure of internship and try to align it both with the organizational requirements and outcomes of the study program. But, this should not be the end itself. Both interested stakeholders need to understand the unique characteristics of different generations and students. The same as the educational process, the internship program should also be tailored to the needs of the particular generation and candidate bearing in mind they are not all the same. This would result in much larger gains for students and organizations that accept interns and expect to possibly find a great pool of candidates that fit into what they opt to find and search for. Internship goals, should be, therefore coherent with their learning levels and capabilities as well as generational characteristic (i.e. Millennials vs. gen Z etc.) This is why authors propose that a sort of Career centre should undertake the role of intermediary in this process but one of the engaged professionals in this centre should be a psychologist. Career centre should be formed at the university level with the very clear role of being the main intermediary between higher educational institution, students and employers. Apart from engaging professionals such as psychologists, they have to work closely with heads of the study program and mentors from the organizations. Mentors should provide in time reports and feedback. Learning objectives related to professional goals should be clearly set and met at all stages of the process. Quality monitoring is another important role the Career centre should undertake. This means that a short survey should be undertaken each time a student finishes with the internship to explore his/her experiences. On the other side, a questionnaire should also be sent to the mentor from the organization. However, Career centre should always be in close contact with the mentor and the organization where the internship takes place. Another role they should undertake is to promote internship and assure more contacts and networks with the real sector.

4.2 Limitations of the study

In this study authors used convenience sample they were able to access (graduated students of interdisciplinary study program Culture and Tourism from Juraj Dobrila University of Pula). So, this study reflects only the opinion of the mentioned graduates. Authors researched graduates who graduated between 2013 and 2021 with highest share of graduates between 25-34 years of age predominantly from Istrian region (65,38%). These graduates were surely impacted also by COVID-19 pandemics that

was present in 2020 and 2021 and their chances of accessing the labor market and obtaining employment in the cultural and creative industries as well as tourism has been strongly affected.

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