

# YES, WE CAN: INTERNSHIPS PROVIDING LEVERAGES IN THE LABOUR MARKET

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## Abstract

Facing unprecedented challenges to deal with the problem of graduate unemployment, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are increasingly concerned with the professional insertion of their graduates in the labour market and with the design of institutional mechanisms that facilitate students' transition from higher education to work. This has been achieved, *inter alia*, through the creation of study programmes with internships, or several other forms of cooperative education between HEIs and employing institutions.

Benefits of internships are extensively reported in the majority of studies dealing with the professional integration of graduates. There is a general consensus that internships can be regarded as an institutional mechanism that facilitates students' transition from higher education to work. However, there seems to be a gap between the intended results and the actual impact of internships on employability, which needs to be better understood. Moreover, existing research tends to be largely based on the perceptions of the main stakeholders involved – students, HEIs, and employing institutions – rather than on actual post-graduation career outcomes.

This paper aims to assess the importance of internships for the employability of graduate students. Three inter-related dimensions are explored. Firstly, the extent to which the introduction of internships in study programmes contributes to the decrease of graduate unemployment rates is analysed. Second, the extent to which the different features of internships, namely those associated with their length and structure, contribute to lower graduate unemployment rates is assessed. Thirdly, the internship approaches, which seem to allow greater job preparedness, namely those related to interns' supervision entailing close collaboration between universities and employers, are discussed.

Our empirical data consists of a unique database comprising 1,168 Portuguese first cycle degrees, with study programmes approved from 2006 to 2009 and published in the Official Gazette. These results are crosschecked with the perspectives of the main stakeholders involved in internships, regarding their motivations; required efforts; and expected outcomes. Empirically, this is based on the content analysis of semi-structured individual interviews to units' coordinators and also focus groups conducted with the coordinators of study programmes; academic internship supervisors; and former interns.

Keywords: Internships, work-based-learning, higher education, curriculum design, employability, employment.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

One important dimension of higher education curriculum design pertains to the inclusion of internships in study programmes. These have been generally conceptualized as learning experiences capable of bridging theoretical knowledge and hands-on experiences. The underlying pedagogical relevance is based on the premise that internships create the possibility of contextualized learning, fostering both professional growth and students' self-esteem and pro-activity. Interns are provided with the opportunity of early networking, as they enrol in practical activities, and professionally interact with other people, besides their academic teachers and their graduate colleagues [3; 10].

In a sense, then, internships are generally conceived as a strategy to ease the graduate's access to work. The premises underlying this reasoning are mainly two: First internships are intended to help students develop specific competences and therefore enhance their *work readiness* or *graduates' employability* [1]. Second, internships as cooperative education strategies potentially straighten the relationship between HEIs and employing institutions, which may recruit the students as future workers, contributing, in this sense, to graduate *employment* [2].

Research concerning internships has extensively reported the overwhelming positive effect of internships (see, *inter alia*, [1, 2, 3, 4]). Despite the burgeoning empirical literature providing evidence of a strong and positive correlation between internships and youth employment, doubts persist in relation to the variables that may be driving this relationship. In specific, little has been discussed as to the effect of different features of internships, namely those associated with their length and structure, on graduate unemployment rates.

Also, existing research has been quite focused. Indeed, the large bulk of research is based on small scale studies, involving two or three institutions [1], reporting data from a single subject area, such as management, business or logistics [3,4], and one higher educational system (polytechnic or university; public or private education). It should not be disregarded the fact that the majority of studies reports results previous to the Bologna reform<sup>1</sup>, which was completed in several countries in the previous decade.

Finally, it is important to notice that these studies tend only to 'tell half the story', since the corresponding research tends to adopt a process or product approach. While some studies are more concerned with the development of students' competences, others (only) focus on the final intended output, namely graduate employment. However in real life both dimensions are closely inter-related. In order to shed some light on the complex relationship between academic internships and graduate employability, and ultimately graduate employment, innovative and more sustained research designs, bridging qualitative and quantitative data, are necessary.

This article is structured as follows. The next section deals with the role of work-based learning in higher education and its relevance for the three most important stakeholders involved (students, HEIs, and employing institutions). Then, it advances the research hypotheses, discusses the operationalization of the central variables and outlines the methodology that was carried out. The findings section presents an assessment of both the effectiveness of internships and of the different nature and structure of internships in reducing graduate unemployment rates. In the concluding remarks, some policy implications are discussed and future research highlights presented.

## **2 LEARNING FOR WORKING - WORKING FOR LEARNING: EXPLORING THE PEDAGOGICAL CAPICUA OF INTERNSHIPS**

That students gain something of value from their work experience has been unanimously recognized by the general public, and also by the more directly involved stakeholders, namely HEIs, undergraduates and employers [5].

Internships, as a first work experience, allow the application of subject understanding covered by study programmes and also the development of some technical expertise [6], giving undergraduates the first sense of professional activity [7]. It seems that taking an internship also leads to higher job satisfaction [8], as well as greater degree of ambition [9]. Besides that, internships allow future graduates to integrate the informal network of employers, enhancing the opportunity to find references, which may be crucial for future career moves [3]. Moreover, the integration of internship experiences in the resume, or as a diploma supplement, can be an important advantage in the completion for the first job seeking [10].

Considering John Dewey's Experiential Learning Theory [11] the 'learning by doing' strategy promotes the acquisition and development of several abilities considered to be relevant for accessing and maintaining a job promoting therefore *graduates' employability* [12] or *graduates' work readiness* [13]. The categorization of those abilities is diverse and sometimes overlapping [14]. While some authors focus on organizational, methodological and participative competences [15], others prefer to use the labels *personal qualities and skills* [7]. Based on this last categorization, Table 1 presents an

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<sup>1</sup> The so-called 'Bologna reform' began in 1999 with the signature of the Bologna Declaration and encouraged the convergence of European higher education systems. The signatories agreed to adopt a common architecture of degrees in tertiary education, as a strategy to increase cooperation between universities; to foster border crossing mobility and successful professional careers of graduates.

illustrative list of job relevant capabilities that can be developed during work-based learning experiences.

**Table 1 - Personal traits and skills considered to be integrative of graduates' employability or work readiness.**

Personal Qualities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- self-awareness and self-confidence: awareness of own strengths and weakness and therefore higher confidence in performing specific tasks and to deal with uncertainties</li> <li>- adaptability/flexibility: disposition to embrace positively changes and to undertake adjustments if necessary</li> <li>- initiative/pro-activity: willingness to take action unprompted</li> <li>- autonomy/independence: disposition to work independently</li> <li>- reflectiveness: disposition to reflect on the experience and to elicit new meaning</li> <li>- work-culture sensitivity: being sensitive to particularities of the working institutions and act accordingly</li> </ul>
Skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- prioritising: being able to rank tasks according to importance and time schedule</li> <li>- planning and decision making: capability in identifying objective goals and define a global strategy of action towards the achievement of those goals managing effectively time schedules</li> <li>- problem solving: being able to seek a range of appropriate solutions and apply those adequately to solve a problem</li> <li>- team working: ability to work constructively with others to achieve mutual goals</li> <li>- communicating: being able to explain him/herself clearly, orally and in writing, as well as being able to listen to others and recognise key-ideas</li> </ul>

Based on the premise that hands-on-experiences entail positive learning experiences for undergraduates, and that they promote graduates' work readiness or employability, the incorporation of work related strategies, such as internships, can be conceptualized as one relevant mechanism to promote graduate employment [1].

In this sense, the Bologna Process and the associated curricular reforms, constituted a unique opportunity to improve the quality and professional relevance of the courses offered by HEIs at a national and international scale [2]. Within the unprecedented challenges presented by the economic crisis and the consequent rise of unemployment, HEIs have been increasingly pressured to minimize the gap between theory and practice of the degrees they offer [18; 1]. It should be noticed that the major bulk of research on the impact of internships has been focused on a time frame preceding the Bologna Reform [20; 21]. Considering that there are already graduates with a 'Bologna-Bachelor' degree that, virtually, started to integrate the world of work, it is now the perfect timing to investigate if the introduced curricular changes actually constitute a 'motor' for graduate employability or, on the contrary, a 'stumbling block' [2].

Naturally, in this attempt to improve and adapt first cycle degrees (FCD), HEIs had to consider not only the potential effects of including internships in their degrees, but also the effects of different course designs. Specifically, there are two main different possibilities for incorporating work-based learning experiences into a study programme. The first one pertains to the integration of a single internship at the end of the study programme, which are commonly referred to as "thick sandwich courses". The alternative is to integrate two or more work-based experiences along the study programme, commonly known as "thin sandwich courses" [19]. Existing research lacks consistent evidence regarding the effects of the structure of internships. In fact, the majority of studies are mainly focused on the internship experience *per se*, rather than on its relation to the study programme. However, the pedagogical principles associated to the main learning theories advocate that the efficiency of a learning experience may be related to the way those experiences are organized and when they are experienced by the student considering his/hers personal development.

The following section deals with the methodological framework used in this research and the extent to which this innovative framework is capable of addressing the major methodological difficulties encountered in existing research.

### 3 METHODOLOGY: RESEARCH AIMS AND GLOBAL RESEARCH DESIGN

This article aims to assess the importance of internships for the employability of graduate students. Three inter-related dimensions are explored. Firstly, we analyse the extent to which the introduction of internships in study programmes contributes to the decrease of graduate unemployment rates. Second, we assess the extent to which the different features of internships, namely those associated with their length and structure contribute to lower graduate unemployment rates. Thirdly, we discuss internship approaches that seem to allow greater job preparedness, namely those related to interns' supervision entailing close collaboration between universities and employers.

Empirically, these interrelated questions were examined using a mixed-method approach. Indeed, this was considered to be the most appropriated model to bridge product vs process perspectives and small-scale vs large-scale perspectives. In this sense a 'two-stage' research design was adopted. Moreover, this innovative methodological approach enhances the study's ecological validity [16].

During the first research stage, the main aim was to assess the impact of academic internships in graduate employment *at national* level. To this end, empirical data was gathered for all Portuguese first-cycle degrees offered in the academic year 2012-2013. Our focus on FCD is justified by the fact that not all universities or polytechnic institutions offer second and third cycle graduate programmes. Besides that, Bologna recommendations repeatedly reaffirm that the FCDs should be "relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification" [22: 263]. Data for this study was collected through the content analysis of all study programmes approved and published in the Official Gazette from 2006 until 2009<sup>2</sup>. We have, thus, captured study programmes that have already been adapted according to the Bologna rules. Also, the period under analysis allows us to examine study programmes that are already stabilised and, simultaneously, guarantee compatibility with the data on the rates of unemployed graduates. In fact, students who enrolled in these degrees within this time frame have virtually graduated in 2012, considering that the minimum time for completing a FCD is three years. To draw meaningful inter- and intra-subject comparisons, all subject areas were included in the analysis. Content analysis of study programs was conducted to assess the existence of this work-based learning strategy, and to gather information as to internships' length and structure. Whenever in doubt, the information available in the official study programs published in the Official Gazette was crosschecked with the information available on the institutional web page or with the information provided by the degree coordinator or the institutional administrative services. Data on graduate unemployment rates is from June 2013.

The outputs of this first stage, informed the design of the second research phase at two different levels, namely: (i) the selection of a group of five cases – Portuguese HEIs offering internship experiences – to be included in the research project; (ii) the conceptualization of semi-structured interview scripts, and consequently the data to be gathered. Moreover, the results of the quantitative stage were used, during the interviews, to promote reflection on internships. In this sense, this particular research design has the advantage of using empirical results close to the informants, since data emerged from the large scale study conducted previously, and not only from other studies. Therefore, informants' perspectives are not only based on first hand experiences, which is the main tendency of studies that adopt a small-scale approach.

The second research stage seeks to explore the perspectives of the main stakeholders involved in internships, regarding their motivations; required efforts; and expected outcomes. It is based on the content analysis of semi-structured individual interviews to unit coordinators and also focus groups conducted with coordinators of study programmes; academic internship supervisors; and former and current interns. Up to this point, three individual interviews were conducted to study programme coordinators (one from a university; two from polytechnic institutions); and three semi-structured focus groups involving recent graduates and university teachers and study programmes coordinators (from polytechnic institutions only) were also conducted. It should be stressed that this stage of research is still ongoing, as this project seeks to obtain answers from different types of universities (public/private) and different systems of HE (universities/ polytechnic institutions) from different regions of the country. The results to be presented in the following sections with regards to this stage of research are, therefore, preliminary.

The next three sections address the research questions previously addressed.

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<sup>2</sup> Data on all FCDs offered in 2012/2013 is available at <http://www.dges.mec.pt/guias/>.

## 4 INTERNSHIPS AND GRADUATE UNEMPLOYMENT RATES

As demonstrated above, prior research has generally supported the value of internships [22; 23], a strategy that is increasingly popular as a method of recruiting potential applicants [24; 25]. While there is ample evidence on the practical benefits of internships, these results tend to be based on students' or employees' expectations and perceptions, rather than on the assessment of the impact of internships on early career employment, which remains an untested assumption.

We sought to test this assumption using regression models. In this section, we seek to understand the extent to which internships reduce graduate unemployment rates. To that end, we used as a dependent variable the unemployment rate of graduate students looking for a job for more than 12 months<sup>3</sup>. The list of independent variables is presented in Table 2, along with some descriptive data. Notice that regression models control for the overall unemployment rates of specific HEIs. By including this variable it is possible to control the social prestige and reputation of certain institutions, which can arguably be translated into a greater approval of the academic degree in the job market [26: 304]. Similarly, the models control for the overall rate of graduate unemployment in specific subject areas<sup>4</sup>, as it is also acknowledged that there are significant differences among areas<sup>5</sup>.

**Table 2 – Summary of descriptive statistics.**

Variables	MIN	MAX	Mean	St dev
Dependent variable: unemployment rate of graduate students ( <i>logged</i> )	-.70	1.52	.5728	.35166
Degrees with internships (0: no internship; 1: includes at least one internship)	0	1	.48	.500
Higher education system (0: university; 1: polytechnic institutions)	0	1	.54	.499
Type of institution (0: public; 1: private)	0	1	.34	.475
Total % of institutional unemployment ( <i>logged</i> )	-.16	1.56	.9597	.24926
Total % of scientific area unemployment ( <i>logged</i> )	.25	1.40	.9518	.16549

Statistical analysis demonstrated that study programmes that include internships tend to significantly reduce graduate unemployment rate. The regression equation for predicting graduate unemployment rate from the presented independent variables is depicted as follows:

$$\text{Unemployment Graduate Rate} = -0,070_{(\text{internships})} + 0,049_{(\text{Higher education system})} + 0,107_{(\text{Type of institution})} + 0,532_{(\text{institutional unemployment})} + 0,186_{(\text{scientific area unemployment rate})}$$

Combined into a multivariate model, the variable on the existence of internships is consistent with the expectations that graduates with internships are more likely to find a job. Taking into account the unstandardized coefficient depicted above (-0.070), it can be estimated that the inclusion of internships in FCDs can reduce unemployment rates in 15 per cent, if we hold all other variables constant.

The magnitude of this result was striking for the majority of our interviewees. Although they expressed a positive view with regards to the effect of internships on unemployment graduate rates, the considerable effect of internships was acknowledged as an added value for the academic staff to continue to offer internships, despite some associated difficulties. We will report some of the interviewees' dilemmas in the following section.

3 It should be noticed that this variable exhibited a skewed distribution. In order to satisfy the prerequisite assumptions of normality, the variable was transformed using decimal logarithms. All regression models presented in this article have been verified to ensure that there are no violations of the rules of the regression models. None of the models revealed problems of multicollinearity.

4 This rate was estimated per field of education, according to the second level of the classification of the International Standard Classification of Education (UNESCO).

5 See, for example, the National Statistics Institute's (INE) Labour Force Survey of 2014 (available [http://www.ine.pt/xportal/xmain?xpid=INE&xpgid=ine\\_publicacoes&PUBLICACOESpub\\_boui=210767546&PUBLICACOESstema=55574&PUBLICACOESmodo=2](http://www.ine.pt/xportal/xmain?xpid=INE&xpgid=ine_publicacoes&PUBLICACOESpub_boui=210767546&PUBLICACOESstema=55574&PUBLICACOESmodo=2)).

## 5 THE DIFFERENT FEATURES OF INTERNSHIPS: LENGTH AND STRUCTURE AND GRADUATE UNEMPLOYMENT RATES

Reaching success and excellence through work-based learning experiences it is not only a matter of offering internships or not. Considering pedagogical principles associated to the main learning theories, the efficiency of a learning experience may be related to the way those experiences are organized and the time they are experienced by the student considering his/her personal development. So when and how should internship experience be offered in order to reap out its benefits? This is where course design comes into the scene. In order to study the relationship between the way internships are organized and graduate employment, two new variables were considered:

i) **Internship format:** there are mainly two different possibilities of incorporating work-based learning experiences into a study program. One way is to integrate a single internship at the end of the study programme. In these cases, degrees are designated as “thick sandwich courses”. The alternative is to integrate two or more work-based experiences along the study programme, being the corresponding degrees known as “thin sandwich courses” [17].

ii) **Internship nature:** internships were considered to be either mandatory or facultative. Facultative internships are those where students have the possibility to choose between facing a work-related experience; select other curricular units; write a theoretical report; or do a work simulation.

In order to estimate the impact of both the nature and structure of internships, we devised a regression model, to sort out which factors play the strongest role in creating a valuable internship experience so that they may function as routes to early career employment. This regression model considers only the effects of such variables in the context of polytechnic institutions. This is due to the fact that polytechnic institutions tend to provide a more practical and professionally-oriented training. It is, therefore, expected that hands-on experience are a crucial part of their study programmes, with considerable implications on the graduate unemployment rate. Moreover, as we intend to crosscheck these results with the perspectives of interviewees, we have to make sure that the results are meaningful to the participants in the study. The regression equation for predicting the graduate unemployment rate amongst graduate students from polytechnic institutions is depicted as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Polytechnic Institutions Unemployment Graduate Rate} = & -0,141_{(\text{nature of internships})} \\ & + -0,202_{(\text{internship format})} + 0,131_{(\text{type of institution})} \\ & + 0,498_{(\text{institutional unemployment})} \\ & + 0,508_{(\text{scientific area unemployment rate})} \end{aligned}$$

Notice that the independent variables on the nature and format of internships were coded as dummy variables. In specific, the nature of internships was coded as 0 if these are optional and 1 if these are mandatory. The variable on the internships' format was coded as 0 if we are dealing with thick sandwich courses and 1 if we are dealing with thin sandwich courses.

The unstandardized coefficients presented above (-0,202) suggest that expanding and diversifying internship activities can reduce the graduate unemployment rate in 37 per cent, if all other variables remain constant. To some extent, it suggests that thin sandwich courses are capable of allowing graduate students to progressively develop competencies by participating in a range of practical experiences. Graduate students are also given the opportunity to increase their networks and gradually learn how to integrate theory and practice.

The nature of internships also significantly impacts on graduate unemployment rates. Mandatory internships seem to be capable of reducing the unemployment rate in 28 per cent (considering the unstandardized coefficient of -0.141, and maintaining all other variables constant). This may be a reflection on the demands associated to these internships, which seem to require an institutionalised collaboration between the academic institution and the employer. This can be extended beyond internships and may be reflected in a greater tendency to employ graduates.

These results strongly suggest that it is not (only) the internship learning experience *per se* that makes the difference in relation to graduate employability, but (also) the way those internship experiences are organized along the study programme, reinforcing Wilton's [4] recommendation of further investigations considering the characteristics and specificities of internship experiences.

The vast majority of internships in the Portuguese context are concentrated in one semester, normally at the end of the first cycle degree, as depicted in Table 3.

**Table 3 – Cross-tabulation of internships’ characteristics (%).**

	Thick sandwich courses	Thin sandwich courses	Total
Facultative	121	14	135
Mandatory	200	221	421
<i>Total</i>	321	235	556

Despite this general tendency, some interviewees tend to consider it as insufficient. As a marketing student expressed:

*“Considering that the internship is ‘our first’ job, the first contact with the real world of work ... naturally our adaptation is a little bit slower ... so when we are really starting to adapt to the company ... and are starting to collect the fruits of our effort ... it is already time to leave ...”*

A straightforward solution to this ‘problem’ would be the extension of the internship experience, for instance, to two semesters. However this would have implications on the organization of the entire study plan, and also on the activities of the entire academic staff, like highlighted by a degree coordinator and a former internship supervisor:

*It would be possible to extend the length of internships. But this would probably imply the suppression of other curricular units ... and this may be problematic (...) because this would mean more internship supervisors ... and not every teacher likes to work outside his/her office (...) Besides that it would mean less lectures (...) and, well ... it is important to assure their teaching time”*

As such, despite the overwhelmingly evidence on the effect of several internships on graduate employment levels, there seems to be some resistance within the academic staff to introduce more internships. Also, despite assuming that learners’ reflection (*i.e.* the process of deriving meaning from experience through questioning what was experienced or observed) is an essential element of experiential education, and that thin sandwich courses offer more opportunities for reflection, interviewees revealed the existence of organizational obstacles:

*“I am an apologist of thin sandwich courses. But when I think of their implementation ... well ... there are some ... complex issues, because even now [...] with only one single internship at the end of the study programme ... we have already several logistic problems that are very difficult to solve ... [also] because of the lack of institutional structures that help to contact the companies” (academic internship supervisor and former degree coordinator)*

It should not be disregarded the fact that all academic interviewees reported this concern with regards to logistic problems. It seems to be quite difficult to conciliate the academic agenda (school semesters) with the labour work agenda. The scientific area of Tourism seems to be particularly sensitive to this topic. To some extent, this obstacle has already led some HEIs to suppress internships from their study programmes and using, instead, a one-semester academic/theoretical project. Others revealed that this issue was overcome by moving the internship into summer vacations. During this high season more employing institutions, such as hotels, are in need of labour force and tend to be interested in recruiting interns. The degree coordinator assumed that this solution was not perfect, since it implies a two to three month delay in the conclusion of the degree. However, according to him/her, this was a solution that all the stakeholders involved (HEIs, students and employers) agreed with.

## **6 OTHER INTERVENING VARIABLES**

Course design is only one amongst the many variables that may influence graduates’ transition from education to work. Naturally, graduates’ employment does not only depend on the type and the specificities of the higher education they receive, but also on other extraneous socio-economic variables, such as the general state of the economy and, consequently, of the labour market [7; 27]. Moreover, screening candidates for internships and assessing their adequacy to different work places,

as well as the internship evaluation seem to matter. These were two issues that emerged during the qualitative stage of this research. We seek to address these issues in this section.

In some HEIs it is the student that has to identify employing institutions that accept him/her as an intern. In other cases a list of employing institutions accepting interns is made available. In this case, some of the employing institutions even institutionalized a competitive recruiting system. As a university internship supervisor mentioned:

*"We have some companies which select candidates ... There is an interview ...in order to select the most fit interns... there is a competitive system, just like it would be during a real job searching experience. After the interview (...) the best are chosen to be interns in that company"*

Considering the co-existence of these two models it is appropriate to further reflect which of them is actually more successful in helping students to access a job. Theoretically the first could be more effective in stimulating the pro-active attitudes of students, since they have the responsibility to find a company. As a coordinator of a private HEI stressed,

*"Students have to understand that their choices have consequences ... choosing implies responsibilities. If he/she wants to do an internship in that particular company it is assumed that he/she knows what he/she wants and what he/she will do and learn."*

On the other hand, do undergraduates have sufficient maturity to balance the pro and cons of doing his/her internship in a particular company? To what extent would a proper guidance, advice and supporting system be valuable assets in the internship experience and, consequently, in the labour market insertion?

Finally, another hot topic that emerged during the interview was the students' assessment during the internship program. According to the internships' co-operative nature, interns' evaluation should be a shared responsibility between the academic supervisor and the employer. That would help interns improve their internship learning experience. However, this does not seem to be the rule. Two main reasons seem to account for this. The first one is related to the difficulties in establishing equilibrium between the academic and the companies' agendas, already mentioned above. Sometimes, companies that receive interns do not have enough time to follow and provide students with valuable feedback with regards to the tasks they are responsible for. At the end of the internships, company supervisors tend to evaluate students with high grades to compensate for the (relative) lack of supervision and guidance. As a coordinator of a private HEI suggested:

*"Sometimes, companies' assessment of students' performance is extremely positive, or extremely negative, which is not related to students' work. For instance, some company supervisors grant the highest grades because they do not have enough time to 'move around' with the interns. Good grades are an excuse and a justification ... that is why the assessment by the academic supervisor and the company supervisor has different weights"*

The second reason pertains to a gap that exists between academic and company supervisors with regards to pedagogical knowledge. While academics tend to be well aware of the competences and abilities to be evaluated, non-academic supervisors have to struggle with a lack of understanding of these evaluation rules. This may become a strong argument against the shared responsibility of evaluation. As a degree coordinator mentioned:

*"We find individuals that are quite distant from this academic reality, from the grading system and so ... and then some complex situations emerge. For instance, some wanted to give a grade of 16 [out of 20] values ... but according to the university criteria it would never be more than 15 ... so we have to adjust this classification. This is complicate."*

HEI have been approaching these problems in different ways. In some cases the academic supervisor is the only responsible for the final grade, taking into consideration the feedback from the employer. In other cases, the employers' grade has less weight in the final grade. In none of the cases there was a clear 50/50 shared responsibility.

## **7 CONCLUDING REMARKS**

This article seeks to unravel the complex dynamic of internships and how HEIs can maximise the internship experience in order to boost their employment effect. The innovative methodology used in



this article allowed shedding some (new) lights on the complex reality involving internships and its relation to employment. The empirical data presented seems to reinforce the global perception that internships facilitate students' transition from higher education to work, being generally recognized as a useful institutional mechanism that has the potential to contradict the rise of the graduate unemployment rate.

However, despite this advantage, internships should not be considered a 'miraculous' and 'easy' solution. Careful planning and human resource managing is required in order to extract the pedagogical and institutional benefits from internships. Within this study several relevant issues associated to internship and course design emerged, namely staff management and student assessment.

Reported findings may constitute an important primer for reflection on the design and or evaluation of pedagogical strategies that maximize the contextual learning outputs of internships in a more systematic way, being particularly relevant for degree coordinators, namely those involved in curriculum design. Results also provide important insights to strategic policy-making in HEIs, as these are increasingly encouraged to assess and improve their employment performance, particularly in countries where this is linked to public funding.

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