



## The international traineeships network at UPF

A comparative study between local and international work placements

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- 1. ABSTRACT:** This work is a preliminary study aimed at assessing the impact of international traineeships at Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF) in the framework of the Erasmus+ Programme. The deployment of post-EHEA traineeships has already been studied in previous works, and a comparison is performed between local and international traineeships. The study is based on a survey among students taking part in these international traineeships, by adapting the previous questionnaire and including contextual aspects.
- 2. ABSTRACT (in Catalan or in Spanish):** Este trabajo es un estudio preliminar para evaluar el impacto de las prácticas internacionales en la Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF) en el marco del programa Erasmus+. En trabajos previos se ha estudiado el despliegue de las prácticas en el EEES, y en este se realiza una comparación entre prácticas locales e internacionales. El estudio se basa en una encuesta a estudiantes que han participado en estas prácticas internacionales, adaptando el cuestionario anterior y añadiendo aspectos contextuales.
- 3. KEYWORDS (in Catalan or in Spanish)::** Prácticas externas, internacionalización, constructivismo, e-encuesta, Erasmus+, Educación Superior



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**KEYWORDS:** Internships, internationalisation, constructivism, e-survey, Erasmus+, Higher Education

### 4. DEVELOPMENT:

#### INTRODUCTION

The implementation of the EHEA has had an impact in different areas of higher education, and one of these is related to traineeships. Some countries with little tradition of traineeships restricted to a few fields of study, as was the case of Spain, have experienced a remarkable increase in the number of traineeships. Another of the goals of the EHEA is to facilitate mobility of students between countries, and this also applies to traineeships. The Erasmus+ programme is an example of the combination of mobility abroad and traineeships in companies.

This work is a preliminary study aimed at assessing the impact of international traineeships in a Spanish university taking part in the Erasmus+ programme, Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF). The deployment of post-EHEA traineeships in UPF has already been studied in previous works (Alemany et al., 2014), and the main conclusions are that there is a high degree of satisfaction amongst students and tutors, although the increase in the number of trainees has caused some disarrangement in the quality of the monitoring that still has to be fixed, and also that international traineeships are still much less frequent than expected.

#### Context

A previous study was performed in the scope of the Faculty of Economic and Business Sciences of UPF in two stages. First, the situation of the internships before (2009-2010) and after (2012) the EHEA implementation at UPF was studied, analysing the changes that were performed. In the second stage, after the EHEA implementation, a survey was conducted to the first and second cohorts of EHEA graduates (2013 and 2014). This study took into account different aspects of the satisfaction level of students with the internships, including their opinion, their perception, their motivation and comments. We also analysed the labour integration of interns, specially how the internships helped in this respect, and the type of student and company characteristics that facilitated this process. Finally, we surveyed the workplace tutors' opinion.

The current study is focused on the UPF international traineeship students, coming from the Erasmus+ Programme and from bilateral agreements with universities all over the world, managed by the Professional Careers Service of UPF. In both cases, the study includes the international traineeships done between 2010-2014 and all the degrees at the UPF level. The focus of this study is twofold: students' characteristics, attitudes, motivation, competences, satisfaction and opinion on one side, and the labour integration of interns on the other side.

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### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this study on traineeships, the theoretical background is based on the constructivism theory and Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle (Kosnik et al., 2013), see Figure 1. The constructivism theory describes learning as a process of reelaboration of knowledge according to previous conceptions and reflection on acquired experience. In the case of international traineeships, the continuous process of knowledge acquisition and learning based on individual experiences and interactions with the environment is enhanced, according to Deakin (2012), with socio-cultural aspects since the student may have to adapt to a new cultural context, a new language, etc.

In the constructivism theory, active experimentation is complemented in a balanced way with the reflexive observation of the acquired experience. For international traineeships, reflexion is more intense because the environment is more influential. In previous studies about internships, for example in Nesbit (2014), the essence of the internship is defined based on the theory of constructivism, in which the learning process is building in a continuous process. Kosnik et al. (2013) analyse the benefits of using experiential learning projects from a pedagogical viewpoint applying Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle.

Deakin (2012) studied and tabulated the differences between studying abroad and doing a traineeship abroad, in several respects, including financial aspects, language barriers, and students' orientation to their future employment, also taking into account gender differences. In the international traineeship context, according to her study, "work placement mobility also reinforces globalisation by encouraging the mobility of individuals after graduation, leading to subsequent highly skilled migration of future workers".

Nesbit (2014) identifies three threads emerging from the state-of-the-art in the current research on internships in the context of the graduate and postgraduate traineeships. These threads, identified in the current literature, are: the opportunities for soft skill development, the integration of theory or course work with practice, and the preparation for employment or career aspirations. These topics are quoted in the context of postgraduate traineeships, but in this study they will be applied to international traineeships, as well.

### OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this work is to assess the impact of international traineeships at UPF and to perform a comparison with the local traineeships results.

The development of the main objective leads to the following complementary objectives: to know which soft competences are developed, to grasp the students' perception on the integration of theory and practice during the internships, their perception on how these traineeships prepare them for a future job placement, and the students' overall evaluation of



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the international traineeships. Finally, to study if an effective work contract or internship extension has been proposed to the student.

### METHODOLOGY

A survey was conducted to look for answers to the following research questions, in the local-international axis:

- 1) To what extent the students developed soft skills both in the local and the international traineeships?
- 2) What is the relationship between the theory acquired in the academic studies and the practice developed during the internships? Is there a higher divergence in international traineeships?
- 3) Are the internships a preparation for a future job placement?
- 4) What are the students' perceptions of their own performance during the internships?
- 5) What other types of generic opinions/comments do students have about the internships?

E-surveys were administered to two groups of students, in order to analyse the answers to both surveys and compare them. Firstly, an e-survey was sent to all UPF students who took part in the Erasmus Practicum Programme (Erasmus+) and those who participated in the bilateral agreements between UPF and worldwide universities, between 2010 and the 2014-2015 academic year. The population size was N=111, including students from all faculties at UPF. The number of respondents was n=46, which represents 41,44% of the surveyed students. The period of data collection was between September and November 2015.

Secondly, an e-survey was sent to those students of the Faculty of Economic and Business Sciences at UPF (the faculty with the highest number of students doing an internship) who took the Practicum in the 2013-14 academic year. The population size was N=657, and the number of respondents was n=293, which represents 44,45% of the surveyed students. The period of data collection was between September and October 2014.

The questionnaire was organised in three blocks of items plus a free answer question, with 18 structured questions and a total of 65 items. The first block included the factual items, the second block was made up of subjective items which were related to research questions 1, 2 and 4, and in the third block the items were related to the contribution of the traineeship to the labour integration, which corresponds to research question no. 3. The survey ended with an open question for comments on topics not covered by the previous items, which gave answer to research question no. 5.



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Going into further details on the e-survey administered to trainees, the first block of the questionnaire included factual items related to personal data of the students and general aspects of the companies, such as: gender, degree, weekly dedication, duration of the internship, monthly wage, size and location of the company, etc., amounting to 12 items in total.

The second group comprised subjective items, with aspects that have been analysed in previous e-surveys. These included students' perception of the relationship between the academic knowledge and the activities carried out in the traineeship, and of the development of competences or soft skills; and students' opinion, motivation and satisfaction with the development of the practices, and with the use of ICT. This block contained four types of questions. The first type endeavoured to grasp the students' perception of the relationship between the academic knowledge and the activities done in the local/international internship (7 items), the development of competences in the internships (7 items) (Knipprath and De Rick, 2014), and students' motivation for the internships (2 items) (Virtanen et al., 2012). Next, the student's opinion about the development of the practices (9 items) (Tynjälä, 2008) and the use of ICT (8 items) was inquired. A third group of questions was related to the students' satisfaction level with the practices (14 items) (Gault et al., 2000), and finally the fourth group of questions was related to the students' assessment of their own work and of the traineeship (2 items). The third block of questions was related to the contribution of the traineeship to the labour integration (4 items). At the end of the survey, one free-answer question was available for comments on topics not covered by the previous items.

The questions in the survey were based on previous works investigating education in the workplace (Tynjälä, 2008, Virtanen et al., 2012), competences (Knipprath and De Rick, 2014), satisfaction level (Gault et al., 2000), and connective models between learning and practice (Griffiths and Guile, 2003, and Guile and Griffiths, 2001).

In order to investigate international mobility of trainees at UPF, an adapted questionnaire was administered to students that participated in some international traineeship, either in the Erasmus+ programme or in bilateral agreements between 2010 and the 2014-2015 academic year.

### RESULTS

The populations of the two surveys were different, one of the surveys targeted local traineeship students of the Faculty of Economic and Business Sciences, comprising 5 degrees, and the other survey was addressed to international traineeship students from all eight faculties at UPF, both undergraduate and postgraduate, i.e. degree and master's degree students.



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The destination countries of the international internship student were: some European countries standing out for the number of students, such as Germany, United Kingdom and Belgium, in order of relevance. Less frequent were: China, Bulgaria, Thailand and Australia. The rest of countries were: France, Italy, Sweden, Greece, Poland, Ireland, United States of America, Portugal, Switzerland and Finland.

Most of these students belonged to the Medicine degree. Next came the Political and Social Sciences degree, followed by the Business and the Communication degrees. The composition of the group of students from the Economic and Business Sciences Faculty was distributed in 5 degrees: Economics (26%), Business Administration (34%), International Business Economics (12%), Business Management (24%), and the double degree in Law and Economics/Business Administration (4%). Only 3% of these students went abroad, to a European country, and 85% went to a regional company. Most went to a multinational company or a big company (52%), and to a local/national company (54%).

### R. Q. 1 - Students' perceptions on soft skills development

Table 1 shows the perception on soft skills development during the internship period for the students from both the international and the local surveys, and the level of significance of the difference between the means. We only present the items which the students pointed out as more important.

It is understandable that “speak, write or prepare reports in foreign languages” is a skill used by the Erasmus+ students, and very much used by students in multinational companies. Looking at the standard deviation, it is obvious that for local practices the foreign languages were not much used in general with some exceptions, and this is explained by a high standard deviation and a high correlation with the type of company; and on the opposite side, in the case of international practices, the mean for this item is the highest among soft skills, and the standard deviation is the lowest. This means that practically all students doing international practices need to work in a foreign language.

The second item in mean level, “group work”, is equally relevant in both surveys, and it is very well related to the faculty-level transversal skills, in all of the degrees. More interesting are the differences in the “give presentations in public” item, in which the standard deviations are quite similar, but there is a consistent difference between the local and the international students. A possible explanation for this difference would be that the international internships survey included postgraduate students. A similar explanation can be given for the “group leadership” and “defend opinions or ideas in public” items. These two types of activities may be too advanced for a graduate student without any labour experience.



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The last soft skill, “group team/coordination”, even though it is part of the transversal skills in most degrees, and some basic experience is already acquired in both student populations, it requires more time to be fully developed.

### R. Q. 2 - Students’ perceptions of the integration of theory and practice

The students were asked whether they applied in the practice the knowledge acquired in the faculties, and if there was any relationship with the practices they developed in the working life. Also in this case, the differences between graduate and postgraduate students can explain the results.

In general, see Table 2, the results show that for the international students there is a major relationship between the theoretical knowledge and the activity performed in the internship. International students, graduates and postgraduates, can have a more focused knowledge to the professional work, especially for the Medicine and Human Biology degrees.

The item that had a lower mean both in local and international internships was the direct relationship between the situations found in the practices and the classroom explanations. This means that classes given in college do not include practical explanations, or they are not given in a practical way, because students agree that there exists an application of the theoretical knowledge to the traineeships, that the knowledge was useful for the practices, and it was related to them.

Local students affirm that there was little relationship between classes and the activity carried out in the internship. In previous surveys conducted with Economics and Business students we already found these results (Alemany et al, 2014). In part, these results are due to the fact that degree studies are focused as intermediate level studies to be specialised in the postgraduate studies and master’s degrees, which implies more difficulty for the student to find this type of connection.

The work and activities done during internships are well related to the knowledge received in the theoretical classes.

### R. Q. 3 - Students’ perception of the relationship between internship and employment

Another way to pose this question is: Are the internships a preparation for a future job placement?

In Table 3, it is shown that the internship will be useful for their professional life and they were very satisfied with the experience acquired. The level of usefulness and satisfaction are the highest in both surveys and items. The relationship between internships and employment is perceived as very high. International internship students even perceived this relationship more useful than satisfactory, and the other group of students surveyed had the opposite perception.



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Internship continuation offers: international internships

In both surveys there was an item asking about the continuation of the internships. Taking into account that in the period when the survey was conducted Spain was in a severe crisis, the results show the influence of this situation.

The students in international internships answered in the following percentages: 20% received a labour contract from the company where they were doing the traineeship, another 20% received an offer of an extension of the internship, 35% did not receive any offer, and the remaining 25% answers were marked as "other". Generally, students in "other" situations were still doing the internship or other situations that they did not explain.

Internship continuation offers: local internships

For the local/national students, the percentages were as follows: 17% received a labour contract offer, 52% received an internship extension offer, 18% did not received any offer, and 13% of the answers were in the "other" category.

The differences are very important, especially between the students who received labour contract offers and internship extensions. The Spanish economic crisis could have affected much more the local internships than the international ones.

For the international students the internships can be of great help in finding a job placement, and this is less definitive for local internships.

R. Q. 4 - Questions that summarised the students' overall perceptions of the internships

The satisfaction level is very high in both surveys and the standard deviation (SD) is fairly tight. The students felt very satisfied with the learning process during the internship. The assessment of their own work during the internship and the overall score of the internship is very high in both surveys, and higher for the local students, although in both cases the SD is quite wide.

Local students valued better the work done during the internship and their overall score was better than the international ones. Table 4 shows these results.

R. Q. 5 - Students' comments on their learning during the international internships

A free open question was in both e-surveys. The students explain the difficulties they found and the inconveniences in developing the practices, in some cases there are bureaucratic problems, and other comments are proposals to improve the process. Finally, they showed they were content with the experience.

Table 5 shows some sample responses from the international traineeship students and from the local ones.





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### CONCLUSIONS

Some conclusions of the study are as follows. First, the ERASMUS+ students value better the studies done than the local internships students, maybe because they are more mature and have more experience. Second, the ERASMUS+ students believe that the programme will have more impact in their professional careers than the local internships students, possibly because postgraduate studies are the last studies before working life. Third, the international internships are not part of the job recruiting process, contrary to the local ones. Finally, the local survey shows that the students think that there is a low number of internships placements in relation to the demand, and there are dissatisfactions with the administrative procedures.

### IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Given the scarce number of studies on work placements abroad, this work will contribute to a better understanding of the experiences of students coming from a South European university and their expectations of finding a job in a foreign country.

As Deakin (2012) points out, “the Erasmus work placement programme has the potential to transform students’ lives.

#### 4.1. GRAPHIC OR TABLE 1

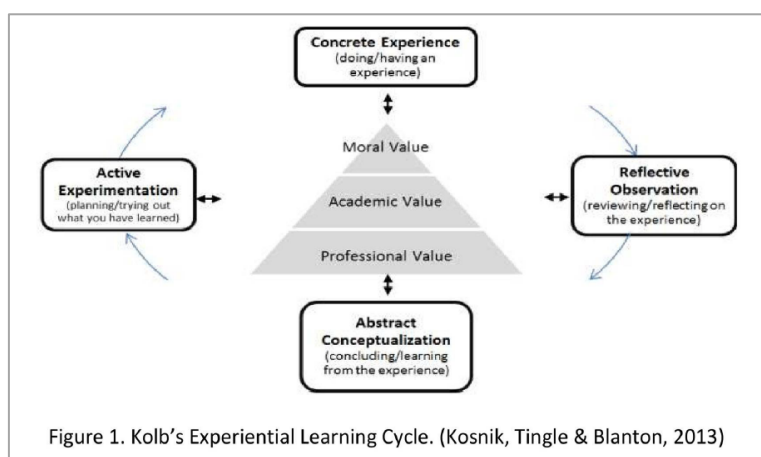


Figure 1. Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. (Kosnik, Tingle & Blanton, 2013)



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### 4.2. GRAPHIC OR TABLE 2

<b>Table 1. Soft skills developed during the internships</b> (1= very low, 4= very high)	<b>International Mean/SD</b>	<b>Local Mean/SD</b>	<b>Difference</b>
Group work	3.28 / 0.83	3.09 / 0.88	NS
Give presentations in public	2.74 / 0.99	1.92 / 0.98	Sig. 1%
Speak, write or prepare reports in foreign languages	3.65 / 0.6	2.57 / 1.15	Sig. 1%
Group leadership	2.02 / 0.98	1.72 / 0.83	Sig. 10%
Defend opinions or ideas in public	2.85 / 0.92	2.3 / 1.05	Sig. 1%
Group/team coordination	2.22 / 1.01	2.28 / 1.08	NS

### 4.3. GRAPHIC OR TABLE 3

<b>Table 2. Students' perception on the integration of theory and practice</b> (1= very low, 4= very high)	<b>International Mean/SD</b>	<b>Local Mean/SD</b>	<b>Difference</b>
During the internship I found situations that had been explained in class	2.65 / 0.85	2.19 / 0.81	Sig. 1%
I have applied in the internship the theoretical knowledge learnt in class	2.93 / 0.85	2.32 / 0.77	Sig. 1%
The classes discussed topics that have been useful for the internship	2.85 / 0.79	2.34 / 0.74	Sig. 1%
The internship is well related to the acquired knowledge	2.93 / 0.85	2.51 / 0.76	Sig. 1%
There is little relationship between classes and the activity performed at the internship	2.02 / 0.95	2.46 / 0.86	Sig. 1%

### 4.4. GRAPHIC OR TABLE 4

<b>Table 3. Employment related questions</b> (1= very low, 4= very high)	<b>International Mean/SD</b>	<b>Local Mean/SD</b>	<b>Difference</b>
Do you think the internship you have developed will be useful for your professional future	3.7 / 0.51	3.39 / 0.84	Sig. 1%
What is your satisfaction level with the labour experience you have acquired	3.67 / 0.67	3.53 / 0.68	NS



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### 4.5. GRAPHIC OR TABLE 5

Table 4. Global Assessment questions (1 to 10 scale)	International Mean/SD	Local Mean/SD	Difference
What is your satisfaction level with your learning during the internship (1 to 4 scale)	3.63 / 0.64	3.34 / 0,75	Sig. 1%
Auto-assessment of your own work during the internship	6.93 / 2.86	7.59 / 2.23	NS
Global grade of the internship	6.24 / 3.47	7.19 / 2.67	Sig. 10%

### 4.6. GRAPHIC OR TABLE 6

Table 5a.	Examples of international student comments	
Scarce placements	<i>There was no placement allocation, I had to find the internship by myself.</i>	
Bureaucracy problems	<i>I had a lot of problems with the agreements before departing. I did not have the agreement signed by the university until two days before leaving.</i>	
Satisfaction	<i>It was a great experience, and more for the personal relationships than for the work done in the company.</i>	
	<i>It is a unique experience that a great number of students should have the opportunity to live.</i>	
	<i>It offered me the opportunity to enter in the labour market, but in the academic area, not in a company.</i>	

Table 5b: Summary of local internship students	Very Good/Good/Bad	Improvement Proposals
Students who have received a labour-contract offer	<b>Very good</b> - Remuneration and the ECTS awarded - Very good experience - It has been the best I did in my studies <b>Good</b> - Better learning in the internship than in the university - Everybody should have this experience	- Better curricula with more business orientation - More coordination between company and university - More schedule flexibility - No minimum salary
Students who have received an internship extension offer	<b>Bad</b> - Final Report requested before the end of the internship - Final assessment done by the academic tutor because the monitoring process is too loose - Lot of problems in the agreement between the company and the university staff - Contradictions between the University organization itself	- Increase the number of hours per year - Simplify bureaucracy - Internship should be compulsory - Term free of classes to do the internship

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