

# **EMPLOYABILITY OF GRADUATES: INSIGHTS TO ENHANCING THE EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH RESEARCH OF INTERNSHIPS OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP DESIGN STUDENTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The focus of this paper is to look at what insights we can get from the students' internships as to examine which elements that enhances the employability of the students at the entrepreneurship design education taught at KEA, The Copenhagen School of Design and Technology.

What can we learn, from how we prepare the students for the internship and from the feedback from our students and the internship companies? What didactical and educational activities do (and should) take place before, under and after the internships? What competencies do the employers or the entrepreneurs demand – and how do we plan and execute our education and teaching to match that? As an entrepreneurship design education we are also interested in finding out who creates their own jobs and why. The used research method is analysing existing data – the written feedback from the students and companies after the internships. To complement this data, pilot interviews were performed with companies taking interns in an attempt to identify factors that enhances employability for entrepreneurship students. After identifying such employability factors, the education will be assessed to evaluate what elements should be either enhanced or decreased in order to implement changes so that the employability can be enhanced.

*Keywords: Enhancing employability, internship, entrepreneurship design, assessment tools, internship didactics.*

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 The context of the research**

Internships are mandatory at all educations taught at KEA, The Copenhagen School of Design and Technology and therefore a crucial part of each student's education. Gravengaard and Rimestad describe how Journalism students first learn *about* practice by participating in the lectures at the school and then during their internships they learn *through practice* to become competent practitioners [1]. This way of teaching also applies to our education, which is a two-year programme at a higher level in the Academy Profession Programme (AP) and where the overall focus is entrepreneurship and design. Furthermore, the connection to the labour market is close through the use of business cases combined with project based, problem oriented and interdisciplinary teaching. During the first two semesters of the education the subjects of the curriculum are introduced, the third semester consists of elective modules and the internship is placed during the first 10 weeks of the fourth semester followed by the final exam where the student finds a problem to solve for a company (often the company where the student was an intern) and writes an assignment and makes a design solution based on this written assignment.

The research of Kinash et al. states that in the higher education discourse employability is a dominant theme [2]. A very important goal for the entrepreneurship design education at KEA is to ensure that the graduates get employed and/or create (their own) jobs. This is also a political focus – both nationally and embedded in the strategy of the school. As part of controlling this employability, the school runs several quality studies: The graduate inquiry, the internship company inquiry, the internship inquiry and reports from the teachers' visits to the internship companies. Data from these

inquiries are stored and summaries of these reports are given to the teachers and the head of studies, but the data has not been analyzed thoroughly. The internships at the entrepreneurship design education started in January 2010 and by now there is a significant amount of data from the different existing inquiries that seemed interesting to take a closer look at. This led to a series of relevant questions: What can we learn from how we prepare the students for the internship and from the feedback from our students, the companies and the graduates that are employed? What didactical and educational activities do (and should) take place before, under and after the internships? What competencies do the employers or the entrepreneurs demand – and how do we plan and execute our education and teaching to match that? As an entrepreneurship design education we are also interested in finding out who creates their own jobs and why.

## **1.2 Research questions for this paper**

To narrow the scope of the research for this paper, these three research questions have been defined: What can we learn from the feedback from our students, the internship companies and the teachers? Which elements enhance the employability of the students of the entrepreneurship design education? Which competences do the employers demand and which competences are needed by the students to become entrepreneurs?

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

The research method consisted of document analysis [3] of existing data from alumna statistics (The graduate inquiry from 2012 and 2017), the written feedback from the students (The internship inquiry from 2013-2016), teachers (Reports from the teachers' visits to the internship companies from 2016) and the intern companies (The internship company inquiry from 2013-2016) in order to identify factors, that enhances employability for entrepreneurship students and hence the approach was analytical inductive. By analysing the feedback from the internship companies, all responses about the students' competences or lack of competences were listed and divided into categories and it was counted how many times each competence was mentioned (see table 1. Ten most mentioned competencies).

Analysing the feedback from the students focused on questions where the students described the outcome of the internship. Both students and intern companies came with suggestions for improvements of the education. To complement this data, two pilot interviews with intern companies were performed to get more feedback about the listed competencies.

## **3 ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

### **3.1 Feedback from the internship companies**

The internship company inquiry has been sent out to the internship companies since 2013. It is a questionnaire where the companies are asked questions about their experiences with the internship concerning the information from and communication with the school prior to and during the internship, the intern's professional and personal competences and the internship companies' opinion of the academic achievement of the intern. The total amount of recipients of internship companies is 158 with approximately 40 recipients per year.

The internship can be seen as a pre test of the student's employability. How well does the student fit in and work in a company? And do the expectations of the internship company match the skills of the intern? Therefore it is interesting to look in to what the internship companies say about which competences they demand and what competencies the student's possess. The companies are asked to answer the following statements "The intern had the right personal competences..." and "The intern had the right academic competences..." and mark them from "very much agree", "agree", "disagree" to "very much disagree". To the question about personal competences, 150 respondents answered "very much agree" or "agree" and 7 respondents answered "disagree" or "very much disagree". 1 did not respond. To the question about academic competences 149 respondents have answered "very much agree" or "agree" and 8 respondents answered "disagree", 0 responded "very much disagree". 1 did not respond. So overall the participating internship companies expressed that there was a match between right personal and academic competencies of the students and the expectations of the internship companies.

The internship companies had the possibility to elaborate on their responses to these questions and these responses turned out to be quite thorough. All responses on personal and academic competencies were listed and divided in to the categories “academic competencies” and “personal competencies” and it was counted how many times each competence was mentioned. The 10 most mentioned competencies are shown in table 1.

Table 1. 10 most mentioned competencies

Competence mentioned:	Personal competence (P) or academic competence (A)	Times mentioned:
Independent	P	20
High standard/clever competent/skilled	A	16
Enthusiastic	P	7
Gumption	P	5
Asked right questions/ (Academically) curious/ interested	P	5
Brings good ideas (and realises them)	A	4
Works well in teams	A	3
Positive attitude	P	3
Industrious	P	3
Good socially/fitted in	P	3

All in all 22 different academic competencies and 31 different personal competencies were mentioned. Some internship companies also mentioned *lack of competencies* (22 all in all) such as slackness, low ambitions, too much absence and lack of humility – as one respondent wrote: “*The intern is here to learn, not to run my business*”.

Most of the comments about lack of competencies came from a few respondents that had experienced a bad match between their expectations and the qualifications of the interns. The comments were such as “*the student had oversold himself*”, “*the student did not deliver*” and “*the student was not interested in the company or the tasks*”.

It was a surprise that so many competences were mentioned and that the personal competences are so numerous and multifarious. This indicates that the needs and demands of the internship companies are nuanced. Some competencies are mentioned many times, thus having an independent intern is very important for many of the participating internship companies and a having a competent intern that meets a high standard is also very important. An internship company writes: “*We are very busy at the editorial, since we are few employees to solve the tasks. Therefore it is a must that the intern can work independently. Our intern took pleasure in tasks that required her to work independently and she always completed them to an A+, and if she had any doubts, she asked for advice.*”

Even though some of our students choose to take an internship in their own company (entrepreneurial internship), the existing design of the questionnaire does not give these students the possibility to choose that as a category and hence it is not possible to distinguish these respondents from the students taking the internship in an internship company. Therefore there is a need for redesigning the questionnaire and/or developing data material that asks specifically about the entrepreneurial internships as to determine factors that enhances employability for entrepreneurial students who wants to start their own businesses and to determine whether these factors differ from the students taking an internship in an ordinary company.

### 3.2 Feedback from the interns

The interns have completed the internship inquiry since 2013. It is a questionnaire where the students are asked questions about their experiences with the internship concerning the guidance from the school prior to and during the internship, whether the school has prepared the interns academically and if the internship has increased the interns' professionalism. The total amount of student recipients is 125 with approximately 30 recipients per year.

The students are asked to answer the following statement: "My education has prepared me academically for the internship." 110 respondents answered "very much agree" or "agree" and 14 respondents answered "disagree" or "very much disagree". 1 did not respond. To the statement "The internship has given me increased professionalism" 118 answered "very much agree" or "agree" and 6 respondents answered "disagree" or "very much disagree". 1 did not respond.

So a majority of the student respondents agree to that the education has prepared them to meet the academic challenges at the intern company plus that the internship has increased their professionalism. From a teacher's perspective it is interesting to look for signs that the student can transform their knowledge from the education to the practice in the internship company. One student explains: *"I have looked at how the company is organizationally structured and observed a lack of good structure and culture. Therefore I have looked at how it can be done better and I have advised them to hire someone to take care of social media, general marketing and PR. Furthermore, I have kept the value chain in mind, since the internship company seems a bit confused about that."* The student elaborates on that: *"It worries me that the internship company has no values and isn't interested in this, they have no arguments for their design choices. Choice of colour and the design has been designed because they think it looks pretty and it corresponds with the other products. Normally, in a design process one would include comparisons with other products, differentiation, market analyses, the target group and much more."* We often see this 'optimization mind set' in our students and that is one of the qualities the internship companies describe and as a teacher it is clear to see that the student uses the theory taught at the education and that the student can use it in a vocational situation.

In conjunction with the feedback from the internship companies referred to in paragraph 3.1 where the majority responded that the students' had the right personal and academic competencies there is a good compliance between the expectations of the internship companies and the competencies the students experience they possess. What lies in the term "increased professionalism" is being elaborated in the comments, where the students write about getting networking skills, how their professional knowledge is put in to play, and seeing and experiencing how a company works in practice. One student puts it this way: *"I have been able to be more constructive towards the theories of learning at the entrepreneurship and design education and I have been able to put them in relation to practice in the business community. The internship has given me competencies within logistics and the art of dealing with and controlling procedures during a big festival."* This is an example of how the students experience *situated learning* during their internship by *legitimate peripheral participation* [4]. An important part of the internship exam is that the student is able to describe the theories and models taught at the education and link them to the practice at the internship company and furthermore to reflect upon that relationship and being able to analyze which competencies the student is lacking/will have to improve in order to get a desired job after graduating.

### 3.3 Teachers' reports

In 2016 the teachers filled in reports from visits to the internship companies where the teachers asked about competences needed by the company, upcoming market trends and observed competences of the interns. 19 reports were filed and the feedback backed up the answers from the internship companies and the interns. One teacher describes what the internship company looks for with interns: *"The internship company look at internships professionally and look for interns twice a year. They always look for two interns, so they can supplement each other and work as a team, and they are willing to give them quite a lot of responsibility. Therefore it is very important for them that an intern can take initiative, has gumption and can work independently solving a task. They also appreciate an intern's willingness to learn and courage to get into it."* Some of the companies mentioned that they were not looking for specialist but generalist employees, which complies with that the entrepreneurship education is a generalist education.

### 3.4 Pilot interviews

Two pilot interviews were conducted with two internship companies. The participants were asked to respond to the list of personal and academic competences. One participant found all the listed competencies relevant and added “*can handle multiple tasks simultaneously*” and the other participant added the competence “*understanding for confidentiality*”. The participants also added knowledge as to what the companies are looking for in the application process. Both of those interviewed stated the importance of the personal competences, as they stated that the academic competences can be learned.

### 3.5 Suggestions for improvement

The interns were also asked if they during the internship got aware of academic subjects that the education should cover. 59 of the respondents answered “very much agree” or “agree” and the internship companies also commented on suggestions for improving the internship period. Both interns and internship companies wish for a longer internship period than the 10 weeks. Such a change would demand a change of the curriculum but since the students have the possibility to continue the cooperation with the internship company during their final exam, it is possible to prolong the internship though on other terms. Academic competences that both students and internship companies called for are for instance Adobe skills, photography and video skills, social media strategies, behavioural design/nudging skills and user experience design skills. Such changes are easier to implement and include in the multidisciplinary projects during a semester since it does not demand a change in the curriculum.

Both students and internship companies ask for an improvement in the communication and guidance from the school before and during the internship period. Several internship companies do not have a clear understanding of the education, the curriculum and what competences and level to expect from the interns. They ask for more information about learning objectives, subjects and expected competencies and what is expected of the internship company. Better guidance concerning the contract between the intern and the internship company is also mentioned.

This suggests that the education should look at how the internship could be more embedded in the teaching leading up to the internship and look at the communication to both students and internship companies. Much of the information about the education, the curriculum and the internship that the internship companies and the students are calling for is available at the school’s website and intranet but it is not clear for them where to get it and how. Some information is not available though and the students are left to figure it out on their own. For instance they have to write their own learning goals for the internship in the internship contract, but they have not been taught how to do that. As a way of solving that, three exemplary examples of internship contracts including learning goals will be made available, so the students get an idea of what is expected for the internship contract.

Several companies explain that some of the interns have very high expectations as of what tasks to solve. One respondent puts it this way: “*In your document ‘What can I do during my internship?’ you suggest a number of tasks, which is ok, but the tasks are generally in the very independent and ‘high/heavy’ category. For instance, to do product development in our company, one must have a master’s degree. And those of our employees that do product development do it very seldom. Everyday life brings a wide variety of more mundane tasks, even for the CEO. As a school it is important that you are realistic and don’t promise them too much.*”

Another respondent elaborates on that it would be nice if the school would help preparing the students for what it means to be an engaged employee: “*We see a growing trend of young students believing that one is industrious and engaged just by showing up on time and just physically being present from 9 AM to 5 PM. Similarly, the level of ambition is to just do the task, barely making it, with no interest in excelling and surprising.*”

## 4 CONCLUSION

The research questions for this paper were: What can we learn from the feedback from our students, the internship companies and the teachers? Which competences do the employers demand and which competences are needed by the students to become entrepreneurs? Which elements enhance the employability of the students of the entrepreneurship design education?

Through document analysis of the existing data material it is concluded that the participating internship companies found there was a match between their expectations and the personal and academic competencies of the interns. The internship companies mentioned 22 academic

competencies, 31 personal competencies and 22 lack of competencies which was surprisingly numerous and varied. The existing data does not take the entrepreneurial internships in to account, so there is a need to do further research on the entrepreneurial internships to determine whether the personal and academic competences for entrepreneurial internships differ from the ones mentioned by the internship companies. The majority of the interns state that the education has prepared them for the academic challenges they meet during their internships and they agree to that the internship has increased their professionalism. The two pilot interviews added information about what the internship companies are looking for in the application process, which is basically drive and chemistry. Both students and internship companies ask for a better communication and guidance from the school before and during the internship period. This communication and alignment of expectations also applies to the school preparing the students for what are realistic tasks for them at the internship companies, as they can not expect to take over the business and even the CEO does mundane tasks. So as a stakeholder, the internship companies seem to have been neglected by the school, concerning the communication and guidance prior to and during the internship period. The next step will be to assess the activities at the education concerning the students and the internship companies respectively to evaluate what elements should be either enhanced or decreased in order to implement changes and comply with the feedback from the interns and the internship companies. The written internships exams will first be available after the deadline of the paper but they can give valuable feedback on the subject as well. There is still a need for interviewing the graduates that are employed and especially the ones that are entrepreneurs as to look in to who creates their own jobs and why. This method of looking at existing and unexplored data material can be used at other educations as a means to improve the curriculum, the teaching and activities focused on the internship.

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