

Internship exchange at Iranian universities: a comment on its impacts and requirements

Kat Hare, B.Eng RMIT University

*Intern at K. N. Toosi University of Technology (KNTU), Faculty of Civil Engineering
National Secretary of IAESTE Australia.*

70 years ago, the International Association for Exchange of Students for Technical Experience (or IAESTE) was founded with the purpose of promoting cross-cultural understanding in the aftermath of two world wars. While this core aim is as vital as ever, the program's value to employers, students, and universities has transformed with the changing landscape of tertiary education around the world. Now, IAESTE is one of the many tools institutions are using to get ahead in the race to internationalise their programs, develop transnational partnerships, and to supply real-world-ready engineering graduates. While some may be self-evident, it is important to note the positive impacts of such exchange programs, as well as key factors to their success. In this way, all academic stake holders can better understand how they may benefit by receiving and sending interns, and how to best provide for these students. This is especially relevant for students and institutions in developing or under-developed countries, who in many cases are most at risk of being disadvantaged by the pitfalls of internationalisation of education.

There is relatively little literature specifically addressing internship exchange (as opposed to academic exchange), and as such it is difficult to provide a wholly 'scientific' or statistics-based review. Instead, this summary references some literature where possible, and draws primarily from my own observations across three continents: as an intern in Vienna, Austria, and again here in Tehran, Iran, and as a member of the national IAESTE Australia administration for several years.

Perhaps the most obvious positive outcome of internship exchange is the opportunity to relate with another culture, whether as the foreign intern who has immersed themselves, or as a local staff member or student interacting with the visitor. Mutual sharing and better cultural understanding can contribute to more harmonious interactions between individuals in Iran and the sending country, intrinsically benefitting both societies.

Although worthwhile, these socio-cultural benefits are not always the most immediate priority for educational institutions trying to create more globalised graduates; competition with other universities, and the mounting pressure to provide holistic and forward-thinking teaching curriculums is a significant driver for many faculties. Where universities perhaps stand to benefit the most, from an educational stand-point, is through the personal and professional growth an overseas internship can provide. Outgoing students leave the comfort of their home contexts and return with a broader set of technical and interpersonal skills (Stronkhorst 2005), without putting greater demands on their home university's resources. The "life skills" gained through such experiential learning are at once difficult to impart through academic units, while being highly sought after within technical industries. Even students who do not embark on an internship stand to benefit from interacting with the student, if only to practice their conversational English and closely engage with an outside perspective. Thus, internship exchange can help to produce Iranian graduates who have pursued greater learning, making them better communicators who are more employable.

Through hosting interns, universities and their staff can also benefit from the exchange of cultures. Inviting international perspectives to a lab or a faculty facilitates the sharing of knowledge and techniques, which is especially valuable to institutions in developing and under-developed countries, where easy access to such information may be lacking. Valuable information about overseas curricula,

methods of course delivery, and so on can be acquired. Further, for universities seeking to expand their intake of international students, the perspectives of foreign interns can be invaluable in terms of priming the institution to attract students from target regions. During my own internship, I have used my firsthand experiences with Australian university websites to help suggest edits to the KNTU International online portal. This is an example of how a single intern can “road-test” the faculty and provide feedback to ensure the university is attractive to potential incoming students, and provides the best possible environment for them.

In the corporate sector around the world, there have been many cases where foreign interns are hired full time upon graduating. There has also been at least one case of an Iranian intern working with their host company to set up a branch in Iran upon their return. This kind of networking and partnership, i.e. professional exchange, is hugely beneficial for the student, the company, and the Iranian economy. This model of partnership is viable for Iran’s academic sphere as well. In hosting or sending a student, universities create an opportunity to build professional and academic relationships abroad, improving their visibility and reputation (Toncar & Cudmore 2000). This can manifest as simple ongoing knowledge exchange, outright research collaboration, or even formal joint academic programs. Importantly, post graduate programs in Iran can also be promoted to foreign interns. Foreign interns working in Iran have already demonstrated some interest in this country by choosing to visit, and following a positive internship experience they may choose to stay or return later. Iranian students who embark on internships may also benefit hugely from this partnership-building, and have the unique opportunity to develop an international network within their study field, before entering the workforce.

The dominance of Western approaches to internationalisation in education around the world is well-documented, along with its negative impacts on developing countries (Varghese 2008; Morosini et al. 2017; Bedenlier et al. 2017). These negative impacts can be avoided or alleviated through engaging in internship exchange programs. Participating supervisors may tailor their internship offers based on the level of study required, field and specialisation, and length of stay. This flexibility empowers Iranian institutions to create an internship model which best suits them and their needs, rather than adhering to an outside, potentially ill-fitting template. Where the overall direction of flow of students for academic exchange is overwhelmingly out of developing and into developed countries (Varghese 2008), for internship exchange this is not the case. IAESTE’s core goal of one-to-one exchange between member countries is broadly achieved. Taking the example of the Middle East, there is a less than 3% difference between the volume of IAESTE interns leaving the region than entering it. (Legacka 2017). The issue of brain drain is apparent, as globally mobile Iranian students may be spurred on to work or further their study overseas. However, the relatively even direction of mobility with internship exchange means that there is a real opportunity for the reverse to happen, and Iranian universities can attract more incoming interns into their post-graduate programs.

In the tertiary education sector, foreign students are often charged considerably more than locals, and are seen to be subsidising higher education in already developed countries (Varghese 2008). In contrast, interns on an exchange are empowered by being paid for the service which they provide the host university. The paid nature of the internships also makes the program more accessible for students from low GDP countries, as the salary provided covers living costs at minimum. Commercialised internship exchange programs do exist and, and as with other profit-oriented educational organisations, may be at risk of prioritising profit over student development and greater learning (Wadhwa 2016). By engaging with not-for-profit internship exchange organisations this issue can be avoided entirely.

So, while internship exchange alone may not solve the greater issues of internationalisation, the model is flexible enough to empower universities in developing countries, and mitigate problems of inequality.

There can be a number of challenges for universities, faculties, or individual staff members wishing to host a foreign intern. Institutional obstacles, such as access to funding and staff language skills, are perhaps best handled by the faculty and are not the topic of this note. However, if and when these are overcome, there are some efforts which should be made to ensure that the subsequent internship is as valuable as possible for both the student and university.

Simply through a student visiting and spending time in another culture, the benefits of cultural exchange can be achieved for all parties (Vandevener & Menefee 2006; Huettman Roberts 1998; Marlin-Bennett 2002). The other valuable outcomes, such as new partnerships, and sustained knowledge exchange, require a more concerted effort. In general, as with all cross-cultural co-operations, a degree of flexibility from both parties is necessary. Different communication and work styles may crop up, but with some patience and openness are unlikely to cause problems. In order to navigate any differences, early and sustained communication between intern and supervisor(s) is important.

It is also of utmost importance that both supervisors and the intern are in agreement or have a good idea about the work that will be carried out before the start date. Many interns expect some degree of structure during their internships, and tangible results at the end of their time. In turn, universities typically have requirements for work hours, dress code, and deliverables. Early communication gives both parties time to discuss and understand these elements. The longevity and success of the internship program can be dependent on this understanding, so touching base before the internship is highly recommended. A detailed internship description is also helpful in this regard. It is important for supervisors to carefully assess the CVs of applicants before accepting them for any roles and exercise their right to refuse an applicant if necessary.

Interns who have received support and direction from their supervisors, and have conducted some level of meaningful work, show greater satisfaction, and are much more likely to show interest in post graduate study and/or other partnerships. For the IAESTE program, intern preferences of timeframe vary greatly, but for northern hemisphere countries a short-term duration over the mid-year is generally preferred. Therefore, an internship duration of 8 weeks is recommended for the 'typical' internship. This allows for a meaningful amount of work to be carried out, and is an attractive timeframe for the bulk of prospective applicants.

To conclude, although there are many different motivations for Iranian participants in internship exchange programs, for students and faculty members alike, there are some common benefits. The intrinsic benefits for individual students embarking on an overseas professional and cultural experience are incredibly profound. Local students may also develop through their interaction with visiting interns, so the benefits are not limited to interns and faculties. With continued involvement and self-reflexivity, institutions can and do take advantage of the exchange to cultivate their networks and build partnerships, improve their reputation, advance research programs, and deliver more advanced curricula. To achieve such success, it is crucial for supervisors to discuss their and the intern's expectations, and provide ongoing support and open communication before and during the internship. Internship exchange is clearly a useful practice for Iranian institutions, and it can also be seen to minimise or negate the common detriments of internationalisation of higher education to developing countries.

References

- Bedenlier, S., Kondakci, Y. & Zawacki-Richter, O., 2017. Two Decades of Research Into the Internationalization of Higher Education: Major Themes in the *Journal of Studies in International Education* (1997-2016). *Journal of Studies in International Education*, p.102831531771009. Available at: <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1028315317710093>.
- Huettman Roberts, E., 1998. The Innocents Abroad. *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 9(2), pp.64–69. Available at: <http://hjb.sagepub.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/content/9/2/183.full.pdf+html>.
- Legacka, O. (IAESTE), 2017. Exchange Report. In *IAESTE 2017 Annual Review*. pp. 8–11.
- Marlin-Bennett, R., 2002. Linking experiential and classroom education: Lessons learned from the American University - Amnesty International USA Summer Institute on Human Rights. *International Studies Perspectives*, 3(4), pp.384–395.
- Morosini, M.C., Dalla Corte, M. & Guilherme, A., 2017. Internationalization of Higher Education: A Perspective from the Great South. *Creative Education*, 8(1998), pp.95–113. Available at: <http://www.scirp.org/journal/ce>.
- Stronkhorst, R., 2005. Learning Outcomes of International Mobility at Two Dutch Institutions of Higher Education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 9(4), pp.292–315. Available at: <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1028315305280938>.
- Toncar, M.F. & Cudmore, B. V., 2000. The Overseas Internship Experience. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 22(1), pp.54–63. Available at: <http://jmd.sagepub.com/content/22/1/54>.
- Vandever, R. & Menefee, M.L., 2006. Study Abroad, International Internship and Experiential Learning: A World-Class Adventure in Learning. *Decision Sciences Institute Southwest Region (SWDSI) 2006 Annual Conference*, (1995), pp.200–207. Available at: <http://www.swdsi.org/swdsi06/proceedings06/Papers/IE07.pdf>.
- Varghese, N.V., 2008. Globalization of higher education and cross-border student mobility. *Research Papers IIEP*, pp.1–33.
- Wadhwa, R., 2016. New Phase of Internationalization of Higher Education and Institutional Change. *Higher Education for the Future*, 3(2), pp.227–246.