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Co-production and collaboration: Academic practitioner reflections on undergraduate internship schemes in History

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Abstract

This practitioner reflection piece discusses and evaluates the experiences of the authors overseeing undergraduate research internship projects in the discipline of history. It considers the opportunities such a scheme can afford the intern, and the potential for contribution to historical scholarship.

Keywords

employability, internship schemes, undergraduate research, collaboration, history

Introduction

Employability is a key agenda in UK Higher Education and firmly embedded in university strategic plans. A widely accepted working definition of 'employability' was developed by Yorke and Knight (2006), suggesting: 'a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy'. As with many UK institutions, ours has sought to make employability a cornerstone of its activities, providing all students with 'a transformative experience that enhances employability, increases aspirations, grows self-esteem, and provides skills for life'. The University's Employability Strategy looks to 'Embed employability and skills development within the curriculum, supported by extra-curricular activities' (Bangor University Employability Strategy, 2022, p. 2).

A number of tools have been created within our university to address this, including an undergraduate internship scheme, discussed in this reflection. Unlike paid employment, paid internships provide work experience over a fixed-term period for students who want insight into particular type of work and develop relevant skills. Unlike voluntary internships, candidates are financially compensated for their input. Such experiential opportunities can be highly valued among employers and graduate programmes (Orsillo, 2022). However, much available scholarship focuses on lab-based disciplines, with their traditional propensity for team-based research (Corte et al, 2022; Wood, 2019). Indeed,

undergraduate research assistance is widely used in the medical sciences to encourage the next generation of scholars who would otherwise follow the expected path into practice (Smith et al, 2023), alongside developing understanding of academic research in the practitioners they train (Mitchell et al, 2020). However, the extent to which this might be of benefit to our students, who study traditional academic subjects like history, requires greater research and consideration.

This is not to say that traditional humanities subjects are completely unsuited to collaboration with undergraduate students in the research process. As Ward (2017), an advocate of co-production in research, has long argued, historians need to rethink the nature of research to encourage ‘collaborative research...[with] students as researchers.’ Collaborative working has the potential to move historians beyond solitary work (Pente et al, 2015), and encourage students to develop deeper interests (Orsillo, 2022). Within the social sciences, different research processes have sometimes encouraged the use of undergraduate research assistants, where ‘undergraduates become part of those research projects’ (Siletile, 2021). This reflection considers aspects of the historical research process where students can make valid and useful contributions. It also develops skills that might benefit them in employment, a factor not always associated with studying history (Collinson & Wiliam, 2021). Here we discuss and evaluate our experiences of overseeing two research internships and consider their benefits to the employability of the intern and as a contribution to historical scholarship.

Discussion

Case Study: Historians, transcription, and employability

The Undergraduate Internship Scheme, managed by our Careers and Employability Service, aims to develop the employability and career prospects of participating students, but also providing all who apply with experience of graduate-level recruitment and interview. Internships are paid (80 hours), extra-curricular and non-credit bearing. University staff submit proposals for internships within their School or Department, which are reviewed by the Careers and Employability Service. Internships must be project-based and provide students with graduate-level work experience.

In advertising the internships, we drew up the following person specification:

Essential:

1. Appreciate the importance of primary sources in historical research
2. Demonstrate interest and enthusiasm in history and the study of the past
3. Proficiency in using Microsoft Office, but in particular, Microsoft Word
4. Evidence of commitment to accuracy in academic work

Desirable:

1. Interest in research and/or editorial work
2. Interest in further academic study

It was important to set out the project expectations at the outset, with the advertisements outlining how interns would be provided with a brief of the project and an example of the work that was expected. Interns attended induction sessions by the Careers and Employability Service and departmental contact, and were supervised by the latter. The intern carried out the transcribing from digital copies of the handwritten documents, with printed copies supplied on demand, and word processed the transcription. This allowed flexibility in work environment as the intern could work on campus or at home.

The scheme offers undergraduates experience in applying for a job, completing an application form and writing a CV, attending interview, and for those who secure internships, experience in undertaking paid work (students are on the payroll, and submit timesheets keeping track of their hours). While this

provides students with insight into the world of work, we additionally found that interns had the opportunity to develop subject specific skills.

Primary sources play a vital role in the study and interpretation of the past, as they are the ‘original documents and objects that were created at the time under study’ (Library of Congress, n.d., para. 1). These sources are usually difficult to access, often stored in archives across countries and continents. To promote accessibility, historians have long viewed the transcribing, editing, and publishing of collections of useful historical documents as an important aspect of scholarship that makes evidence more accessible to scholars and students. These are usually published by often-historic, dedicated publication societies, the first of which, the *Hakluyt Society*, was founded in 1847 (Davis, 1975). If anything, the Covid-19 global pandemic emphasised the significance of this aspect of historical scholarship, as accessibility to sources when archives were closed affected how historians operated (Sye, 2022). This approach provides a nineteenth century answer to the modern conundrum, and provide new scholars with opportunities, established scholars with publications, and record societies with a volume. Each of our projects revolved around transcribing historic primary sources. Once transcribed, these documents were checked, edited, and annotated by the editors. We then wrote in-depth introductions to place the collections in context, to be published by scholarly publishing societies, thereby opening access to these unique collections (Rees, 2023; Collinson & Dockerill, in press).

Making sources more available is a great opportunity to work collaboratively. Within the historical discipline, the co-productive approach, which encourages research with people, rather than on them, might help historians move beyond solitary working into a collaborative enterprise (Pente et al, 2015). Furthermore, it can act as a first step towards potential study (Marcellus, 2023) or can equip students with graduate-level skills like interpreting and analysing data, or critical thinking (Orsillo, 2022). For historians, specific considerations come into play. While history needs to adjust to the employability agenda, it has often encouraged a number of important graduate attributes (Collinson & William, 2021). While the work tasks undertaken by the intern may be more representative of an academic career pathway, they also feed into the history graduate experience outside academia too, in fostering important career skills, including oral and written communication, digital literacy, and proficiency in the fundamentals of research and analysis (Quality Assurance Agency, 2022). Therefore, the opportunity for students to be involved in actual publications can aid student employability and validate skills gained (Willet, 2019). This also aids academic staff, as it encourages them to move away from a culture that favours the solitary scholar (Pente et al, 2015). However, upscaling this requires greater institutional support, in our case, from the University’s Careers and Employability Service and their funded internship scheme.

Concerns: Selectivity, Research Quality, and Student Benefit

Furthermore, history research projects have different requirements than lab-based science subjects. Work needs to be realistic to be worthwhile, ‘rather than an exercise’ (Corte et al, 2022). So, while a project incorporated into teaching could be built up around simulated research (Willet, 2019), for a paid research internship, the work should be real and the skills applicable (Galbraith & Mondal, 2020: 5-6). Often, undergraduates are recruited on projects that may not directly feed into academic research but contribute to campus activities were staff may find it difficult to engage (Wood, 2019). The chance to be involved in a ‘real’ research project ending in publication could be transformative to students who ‘aspire to an academic career’ (Nelson & Petrova, 2022), but also to those who want to trial it in ‘a low-stakes situation’ (Ray, 2022). Afterall, collaborative working with students might be challenging, yet rewarding for all, especially to student validation and employability options (Willet, 2019). It can also have positive effects on a student’s academic performance, due to the realities of a workplace environment (Binder et al, 2015). As teaching staff, we found the experience beneficial and positive, with good quality historical outputs. However, student benefit and employability need to be considered.

Although students that apply for internship opportunities may appear 'keener', the extent to which an internship can increase employability often depends on the discipline the student studies (Price & Grant-Smith, 2016). Therefore, any internship needs to be worthwhile. That our internships were paid addresses some long-held questions about the ethics of unpaid internships, and accompanying inequalities (Hunt & Scott, 2020). However, as important is the design and management of internships. A badly designed internship can lead to poor outcomes for both the creator and the intern, so making the internship 'deliberate, purposeful, and well-done' is vital (Rogers et al, 2021).

Being involved in academic publication may not be as significant an employability capital beyond academia, but in this context, one important debate concerns authorship and contribution. As Nelson and Petrova (2022, p. 423) have queried 'what constitutes enough of a contribution to warrant being designated an author?' As they outline, 'common practice is to credit...through a special mention in the acknowledgements section...[but this] lacks transparency, does not consider the significant contribution some RAs make and has little to no bearing on their future careers' (Nelson & Petrova, 2022, p. 423). However, it must be noted that many of these concerns relate to post-doctoral research assistance. We found undergraduate students did require a heavier editorial steer, and greater mentorship was necessary. There is potential nonetheless for students to go beyond transcription to contribute in a way that would warrant co-authorship status, such as collaborating on a scholarly introduction.

The collaborative nature of the approach requires significant staff input. To ensure intern understanding of how to 'collect and analyse data, write reports to address certain issues. Lecturers and supervisors are there to assist and guide students... they get to grow and know the expectations at postgraduate level' (Siletile, 2021). With the primary source reproduction project, the creation of text transcripts for an edited volume means a degree of quality control and selection does come in. The work set for the intern must be within their skillset and useful, as Willett (2019) has argued, 'The point here is not that undergraduates are an untapped labor resource that we should exploit'. Rather, an internship with appropriate mentorship for a student with sufficient skills and commitment has the potential to make a real contribution to research. A major issue with internships is that, by their nature, they can only be taken up by one or few students. This is due to the need for effective mentoring. As Political Scientist John Chin has observed, a "learning-by-doing" research approach is something worth pursuing, and ideally at scale', but that 'research mentorship' was vital to success (Marcellus, 2023). The level of one-to-one supervision required could make this difficult were we to engage with a larger group.

Conclusion

Experimenting with undergraduate interns as research assistants was a qualified success. Both projects are either published or close to publication, and the students verbally informed us that they had enjoyed the work. At our institution, projects are designed to enhance undergraduate employability, in line with the Extracted Employability Concept, and the added employability offered by internships (Daubney, 2021). Applicants develop skills linked to the workplace realities around application and payroll, gain subject-specific insights due to the academic supervision of the internship, and try out opportunities while studying remains the priority. Academics in humanities disciplines can benefit from these opportunities, which have often been dominated by non-humanities disciplines. In a changing research environment, where collaboration, research impact, and community engagement are increasingly favoured, co-production of research with students becomes more natural and necessary. It should not be seen as a panacea for staff with limited time as, for it to be successful, students need effective and sometimes time-consuming mentorship. However, it is a refreshing way to work. Future research will have to explore how recent high inflation might limit student willingness to undertake voluntary opportunities and see increased interest in, and perhaps the necessity of, paid internships.

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