Arcada's internship model for international students

Introduction

In the INTERLOCALITY project, Arcada piloted a "pre-internship" model based on the idea of pairing an international student and a local student. The international student would be supported by the local student in order to integrate into the local work life. The desired outcomes for the pre-internship were:

- Expansion of network
- Insight into local companies and understanding about what the internship is like
- Sharing of new ideas and perspectives (intercultural collaboration)
- Closer connections into local work life
- Possibly an internship and higher chance of retention in host country

At Arcada we had only just before the start of the INTERLOCALITY project started to plan a new kind of internship model where international students would support and train each other. The initial idea came from Linn Hongell, who works as a Senior Lecturer in Business Administration at Arcada. We noticed that our idea had the exact same desired outcome as the idea of the INTERLOCALITY pre-internship. The only differences were that our international students are supporting each other and that the support happens when the internship starts, not beforehand as was the initial idea of the pre-internship model. Arcada's internship model was first piloted in autumn 2022, but an iteration of the first pilot took place as part of the INTERLOCALITY project in spring 2023.

After piloting the model in spring 2023, we conducted qualitative research among the participants. The aim was to assess the current strengths and weaknesses of the model to identify needs for further development.

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Content Overview

## 1. The internship model in practice

International students face various difficulties in finding an internship or employment after graduation in Finland. There are challenges in for instance finding suitable internship positions, connecting with suitable organisations, language barriers, and possible employers' willingness to hiring students with international backgrounds. Many of these challenges can be tackled if the higher education institution (HEI) takes a stronger role in coordinating internship placements for international students. Completing internships also significantly increases the chances of securing employment after graduation in Finland.

Arcada's internship model was piloted with our Bachelor's level International Business (IB) students. In their study plan, international students have two mandatory internship periods of 10 weeks. They can be completed either separately in different organisations during different academic years, or in the same organisation during 20 consecutive weeks. In the study plans there are free time slots for internships in period 4 (March-May) during the second and third years of study, but the internships can also be conducted alongside the studies whenever the student wants. This model offers 20 weeks long internships on a continuous basis around the year, with a two-week overlapping time period with the outgoing and incoming intern. The internship model is unpaid as it is a mandatory part of the curriculum and the student receives 30 ECTS for a 20-week internship.

As mentioned earlier, the initial idea of Arcada's internship model has been presented by Linn Hongell (2019). Hongell presents the overall idea as follows:

"The aim is to create a continuous system where a company accepts the responsibility of three internships each year. The internships' initial cost would be to train the first intern but thereafter the interns would train each other and thus the organisation's training cost would be minimal. For many international students, an internship in Finland can be non-paid as it gives study credits and work experience, as well as allows them to make more contacts, while obtaining references for their cv and boosting their self-esteem."'

The figure on the next page illustrates the model in practice, showcasing the process between Arcada and partner organisations.
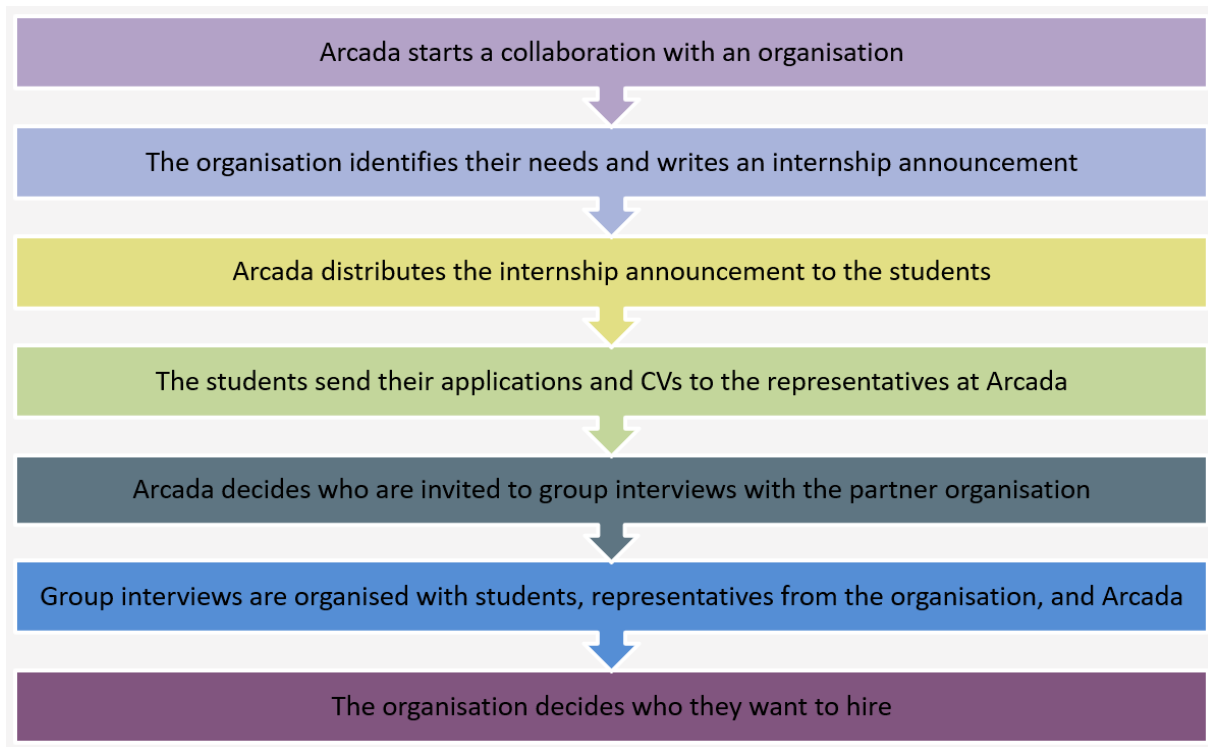
2. Methodology

In order to develop a solid understanding about how the new internship model for international students has been experienced so far, a qualitative research was conducted. We conducted interviews with 4 of Arcada's International Business (IB) students and 4 employer representatives from two different organisations. One of the partner organisations was a company offering automatisation solutions for the logistics industry and the other organisation was a charity organisation operating internationally. A third organisation was part of the iteration in winter-spring 2023, however we decided to exclude them from this research as by the time of the interviews they had only started with their first intern from Arcada. All the 4 interviewed students had completed their internships at one of the earlier mentioned partner employers, either during the fall 2022 when the first pilot took place, or winter-spring 2023 when the iteration of the initial model took place. They have all been part of either onboarding the new intern or being onboarded by the previous intern from Arcada. The focus was on two main research questions:

RQ1: How has the internship model been perceived so far a) by our IB students b) by our partner employers?

RQ2: How could the internship model be developed to better benefit both our IB students and our partner employers?

The interviews took place in April 2023 via MS Teams. The respondents were contacted through e-mail and the interview questions and a consent form were delivered to them before the interview. The analysed data was used to develop the internship model further and reported to the INTERLOCALITY project group.

3. Results

The first research question of this study is "How has the internship model been perceived so far a) by our IB students b) by our partner employers?" and the results from students and our partner employers will be presented separately. Some development suggestions, in other words the results for the second research question "How could the internship model be developed to better benefit both our IB students and our partner employers?" will also be presented in this section.

Students' experiences

In order to make this internship model appealing to Arcada's IB students, we wanted to know what made the student apply for the internship at our partner organisation. Students mentioned e.g. interest in the description of the position, a need to find an internship in order to graduate, and a possibility to familiarise oneself with the Finnish work life and culture as reasons to apply for the internship. Two of the students also mentioned that they found it difficult to find an internship position by themselves in Finland and that the market is very competitive.

All respondents had found information about the position through the e-mail advertisement. None of the respondents had seen any other advertisement elsewhere. When asking the students about best marketing channels for this kind of internship positions all respondent answered that e-mail marketing is the most efficient one. Other suggestions were e.g. Arcada's webpage, other online tools such as the learning management system (LMS), social media channels such as LinkedIn, and posters on campus. One student also mentioned that the positions could be advertised in classes of respective subjects.

According to the students' the recruitment process was convenient and efficient. The experiences from the group interviews were particularly positive. All students mentioned that the idea of a group/pair interview made them nervous in the beginning, but finally all students found it to be a good learning experience. It was mentioned e.g. that at first one thought that the competitive situationwas intimidating, but at the end it was nice not to be "put on the spot" alone in the interview situation. One student mentioned that the interview session was a good opportunity for self-reflection and to develop your own employability skills.

All students said that the internship was a positive experience. All 4 respondents said that they learned a lot during the internship period, and both soft and hard skills were mentioned. Three of the respondents also mentioned that they were nervous at first and that learning new things can also be tiring. Overall, the students found it to be a positive thing to step a bit out from their comfort zone.

When asking about challenges during the internship, two students mentioned that the overall familiarisation with the organisation and new tasks have been the most challenging part. Other challenges that were mentioned were the lack of enough suitable tasks and combining the work with study schedules. It was mentioned that it takes lots of time and effort to study alongside full-time work. One student on the other hand found it easy to combine school with work, as it was possible to do schoolwork during office hours. Two of the students would have hoped for more guidance from Arcada's side regarding how to combine studies and this internship. However, these students had not asked for help or flexibility from their teachers. The main challenge mentioned in the interviews were the lack of salary and the length of the internship. Three of the students mentioned that 20 weeks is a very long time to be working full time without any compensation. They also found that 20 weeks of full-time work doesn't feel to correspond to the amount of study credits that they get for the internship. One student would have hoped for a possibility to continue working for the organisation after the internship.

When asking about the guidance the students received during the internship, the experiences varied a bit, even within the same organisation. While one student said that the guidance had been good and that everybody had been very helpful and supportive, another respondent from the same organisation would have hoped for more structured guidance. In the other organisation both students felt that they had received enough support and feedback for tasks they had done. In one of the companies the students felt that the tasks were so different to the previous interns' task that they did not receive that much guidance from the previous intern regarding everyday work and tasks. However, they felt that it was nice to get some support and introduction from the other student. Overall, the respondents found the idea of previous interns onboarding the next intern during the overlapping two weeks to be a good idea.

Regarding language skills and cultural issues all students shared the same experience that the companies they had been working for were very international, and there had not been any challenges related to language or culture. Some positive experiences regarding language were mentioned, e.g. a native English-speaking student had been given special responsibilities due to good language skills, while another student could use his mother tongue with a client who did not have strong skills in English. One student mentioned that it could possibly be easier to bond with some of the colleagues if he would speak Finnish but had not felt this to be a problem.

Based on the interviews we can identify some clear development suggestions for the internship program. From students' perspective the development suggestions mentioned were 1) clearer task descriptions in the internship announcement 2) support in combining studies and the internship 3) some kind of salary or compensation for the work and 4) a shorter internship period.

All students would recommend the internship model to their peers. The main reasons why they would recommend the internship model were the fact that is difficult for international students to find internships and that they had themselves had good experiences, learned a lot, and felt that they had the possibility to familiarise themselves with the Finnish working culture. The main reason the students thought holds their peers back from applying to the internship model is the lack of salary. When asking about whether the students found the internship to benefit their future career, everyone said that it will. They felt that they had learned important skills, developed confidence and built networks. Additionally, it was mentioned that the internship experience will look good on the CV in the future.

Employers' experiences

The two organisations that were interviewed as employer representatives had both in general very positive experiences from this internship collaboration with Arcada. When asking about the initial interest to start the collaboration the first organisation mentioned that they had already internally identified a need for assistance, and they had been thinking about hiring interns even before Arcada reached out to them. The second organisation was contacted by Arcada and became interested in starting a cooperation as the model sounded like a win-win-win deal for all parties. It was also mentioned that the model that was presented sounded well-planned and easy to get started with.

Regarding the recruitment process the representative of the first organisation had not been part of the recruitment process and could not answer questions regarding that, but based on the experiences from the second organisation the process has been working well and been well organised from Arcada's side. They were happy to get to interview "pre-filtered" candidates. Regarding the interviews it was mentioned that organising pair/group interviews has both positive and negative sides. The positive side is the possibility to compare the candidates and to see how well they perform under pressure and competition, but the negative side is that it can be difficult to see the full potential of a candidate if the interview situation is too stressful.

Looking at the timeframe of the internship model and recruitment process, it was mentioned that it is a good solution have three rounds of interviews a year, in other words to recruit one intern or batch of interns at the time. This makes it easier for the organisations to give more specific task descriptions when they know their up-to-date needs.

Regarding the experiences of being employers for Arcada's interns, both organisations had only positive feedback for our students. They have found the students to be for instance pro-active, trustworthy, engaged, mature, independent and brave. Both organisations stated that the students had actually been of real help and able to do more advanced tasks than they originally thought.

When asking about challenges a few things were mentioned. In one of the organisations they felt that the students are almost too independent and prefer working by themselves instead of in teams. In one organisation there had also been some challenges with students having to study alongside the internship, and the supervisors were not fully aware of how to relate to it. They were worried about the workload for students, while at the same time concerned that the students need to fulfil the required working hours of the internship. The same organisation mentioned that there had also been internal challenges within the organisation regarding the information exchange about the internship agreements.

Neither of the organisations had yet had full benefit from the overlapping periods in this model. In the first organisation they had yet had only the first batch of interns, and in the second organisation the tasks for the interns had changed so that the first interns were not able to train the second batch. Both employers however found the idea of the overlapping weeks to be good and felt that even if the tasks would change it can be a great help for integrating the new interns and making them feel welcome.

Like the student representatives, also the employers found that there had not been any challenges regarding the language skills or cultural differences. Both employers highlighted the fact that their organisation cultures are very international and that the general working language is English. One employer mentioned that they needed to modify one student's tasks a little bit as the student did not have strong enough skills in English, but they recognised other strengths in the student, and managed to modify the position in a way that the student could bring benefit to the organisation by doing other kinds of tasks.

Regarding development suggestions from the employer perspective, the following things were mentioned 1) clearer rules regarding the requirements of the internship and e.g. student's participation in classis during the internship 2) development of further collaboration with Arcada, such as guest lectures or commissions for thesis studies.

4. Discussion and development suggestions

In this section the results and development suggestions are discussed. The students' and employers' perspectives are again discussed separately, and additionally some overall learnings from this internship pilot are presented. Finally, the sustainability and future of the internship model are evaluated.

Student perspective

Based on students' responses the overall experiences have been positive, and the internship has met the desired outcomes, which were:

- Expansion of network
- Insight into local companies and understanding on how the internship is
- Sharing of new ideas and perspectives (intercultural collaboration)
- Closer connections into national work life

Even though the internship model had mostly positive outcomes, some challenges have been noticed. The task description in the internship announcement could be more detailed and clearer, as now it was mentioned that an unneeded uncertainty caused stress before starting the internship. This will be noted when we start the next recruitment round. Regarding combining work and studies during the internship time, more guidance and support was asked from Arcada. This was requested also from the employer side and will be discussed in the following section where we discuss the employers' perspective. The students had been informed in advance that they can and should discuss with their teachers about flexibility in their ongoing courses that overlap the internship. This needs to be communicated to students more clearly in the future, as now none of the students had actually asked for this flexibility.

The most important development suggestion from the students was that the internship should be compensated with some kind of salary. This is reasonable as international students do not receive study grants from the government, a tuition fee is paid for the studies, and the internship is a compulsory part of the studies. The employers also mentioned in the interviews that the benefit they had from the interns have been greater than expected, which also supports the idea that some kind of compensations could be offered. This is something that we will discuss with the employer organisations before the next round. The students also found 20 weeks of full-time work to be quite extensive. Arcada's study plan, however, includes 20 weeks of practical work, and cannot be altered. Additionally, from the employers' perspective, a shorter internship would not be attractive.

Employer perspective

As can be seen in the results, the employer experience is positive. The students have performed well, and the process has been smooth. The recruitment process functions conveniently, and it has been noted that it is best to recruit interns for only one period at the time, meaning three rounds of interviews a year. One of the employers mentioned that by recruiting one intern/ batch of interns at the time, it is easier to give clearer task descriptions in the internship announcement, which was also requested from the students.

The only development suggestion for the internship model was that clearer rules and guidance regarding combining the internship with studies could be offered by Arcada. This is an important development suggestion as students also struggled with this. We will in the future include the following steps to develop a better process for the communication regarding the combination of studies and internship; 1) the rules regarding the combination of studies and internship will be explained in the interview situation, where both the student and employer are present 2) the selected student will receive instructions on how to plan the studies during the internship period in cooperation with teachers and the employer 3) a more detailed description of the requirements shall be included in the internship contract. One of the organisations also hoped for further cooperation with Arcada, e.g. in the form of guest lectures and commissions for thesis studies.

Key learnings and development ideas from Arcada's perspective

From Arcada's perspective, this internship pilot has in general been successful, but there are some concerns regarding the future that are partly the same as highlighted by the students and employers and partly something that Arcada needs to take a stand on internally. One of the main challenges that were mentioned by students was the combination of studies and the internship. The reason why this becomes a problem is that normally the students do not have any courses in period 4 and are supposed to do their internship during that time. In order for this model to work, we need to have students out on internships all year round, which leads to the fact that they need to keep up with compulsory courses, in order to complete their study plan. One possible solution for the future could be to make the internship a part-time contract that would better suite students that also need to combine the internship with some compulsory courses. Our concern is however if this kind of a solution would be attractive for the employers.

Another challenge that the students mentioned was the lack of salary. As mentioned earlier, this is understandable from the students' perspective. When we look at it from Arcada's perspective, it needs to be highlighted that the internship is part of studies, it's practical learning that takes place outside of the school building, but otherwise the students get study credits for the internship in an equal proposition as they get from studies on campus. Another concern is that the recruitment of partner organisations could be significantly more difficult if they are required to pay salary for the students. It would possibly be unattractive for organisations to commit to a model that functions on a continuous and consecutive basis if they know that it requires an economic investment from their side. Further we recognise that if salary is paid the students would have a higher degree of responsibility. Another thing to consider is the flexibility to combine the internship with studies. If there was a salary involved the employers would most likely not be as willing to be flexible with students participating on compulsory lectures during the office hours, while with an unpaid internship we could possibly negotiate even more flexibility for students to combine the internship with studies.

One big concern from Arcada's perspective has also been the fact that there have not been too many students applying for the internships. In the interviews with students it was assumed that the main reason for this is the lack of salary which might be the case. Another reason could be that the marketing of the internship positions has not reached out to all students. The student respondents mentioned that they had received information about the internship by e-mail but not seen any other marketing. In fact, all the channels the students recommended to use for marketing have been used to market the internships but clearly the message has not reached all students. Another reason could be the fact that the task descriptions in the first rounds were quite vague, and as two of the respondents mentioned even a bit frightening. In order to lower the barrier to apply we need to make sure that the internship announcements in the future are not too scary and that the tasks don not seem to be too advanced. Finally, it is important to highlight that the interviews took place less than a year from the starting of this internship model, meaning that there has not yet been a possibility for enough word-of-mouth marketing among students. Also, the students might have internalised the idea of period 4 being reserved for the internship,so that they have not been noticing other options.

Another interesting aspect that the students highlighted was the positive experiences from the pair/group interviews held for the applicants. They mentioned that the experience was a good opportunity to learn. However, these are only perspectives from the students that finally got selected to the position and we do not know how the other students that were not selected for the position have experienced it. Nevertheless, there could be a possibility to develop the whole recruitment process to be a learning process for all applicants. We believe that all students would benefit from improving their employability skills, starting from writing an application and CV, to representing themselves in interviews. By supporting the students in the recruitment process and giving feedback afterwards the process could be beneficial also for the students that do not get selected for the position. However, this would require far more resources at Arcada.

The final concern from Arcada's perspective is connected to internal resources and sustainability of this internship model. Already now Arcada's role is quite time consuming and if we were to recruit even more partner organisations it would require even more resources. On the other hand, when the model is up and running and the processes around the internship model have found their shapes, it would probably require less time and effort than it does now. In the end this is a question of prioritising. Arcada has resources reserved for managing the internships and the question is how Arcada wants to use the resources. If this model is seen as brining value to the education and offering

References

Hongell, Linn (2019) International Degrees and Employability. *Internationalisation and Higher Education: A Strategic Perspective.* Arcada Publication 1/2019. 96-101. https://www.theseus.fi/handle/10024/266546

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