Abstract

Current competitive job markets require from young college graduates a wide variety of interpersonal and personal skills that are often not a part of their professional or academic training [1, 2]. Internships during the third year of college, combined with on-site mentoring from professionals at the workplace provide a bridge from the academia to the labour market for many graduates. Internships provide these graduates with an opportunity to explore positions related to their studies and occupational expectations, to gain practical experience, and to gain a competitive advantage upon entering the labour market. It also provides them with opportunities to network and to strengthen skills necessary for finding and holding a job in their profession. Students selected for these internship programs often come from diverse backgrounds and from marginalised communities.

In this paper, I will share some of the data and insights gained in recent years as a lecturer of numerous annual courses that accompany interning students at Sapir Academic College in Israel. These courses, entitled "The Next Thing", are part of an ongoing effort to enhance graduates' employability. Students are carefully selected for the program, and throughout the year learn and practice various 'soft job-skills'. The results indicate that a high percentage of the interns were offered jobs soon after the completion of their internship either at the workplace where they interned or at a similar placement. Networking with professionals in their field was a springboard for many of these interns. Most of the students reported a high level of satisfaction from the applicable skills they have learned during the course that accompanied the internship and from the ongoing process that helped them develop professionally and personally. For some, this course was the most useful opportunity in their education to understand what is required for making the transition from college to the labour market.

Keywords: College-work transition, internship, mentoring.

1 INTRODUCTION

Several prevalent phenomena and trends in Israel and around the world create a significant barrier to using higher education for finding appropriate jobs, especially among young people from geographic and economic peripheries. There is an international consensus that internships are the most useful tools to overcome this barrier and increase the employability of graduates [1, 2].

The Next Step program is a national program in Israel, implemented in most academic institutions. Its aim is to include as many senior year students as possible in an internship program. The program creates an opportunity to create a bridge, a transitional period that could facilitate the transition to the labour market once they graduate.

In this paper I will present the interns program and its rationale, as well as how it is implemented at Sapir Academic College, which is in the western-southern part of Israel.

1.1 What are the transitional challenges between higher education and employment?

Higher education is an important, even critical platform for personal advancement and to occupational and economic mobility. Studies indicate that there is a significant positive relationship between education, employment and income. Education plays an important role in setting the rates of employment, the quality of employment and the reduction of employment inequality. Still, even after gaining an academic or professional degree after investing much effort and resources, many young people find it hard to 'cross the bridge' from world of higher education to the labour market and to use
their training for an appropriate, high quality job. The reasons for this hurdle are trends evolving on both sides of the bridge.

In Israel, since the establishment of the state in 1948 until 2015, the number of residents grew tenfold, while the number of people with an academic degree is grew by two hundred. The greatest increase in the number of higher education graduates followed the decision to open dozens of colleges in the 1990s. While this decision created an opportunity for diverse population to attain an academic degree, it also reduced the status of a bachelor degree and increased the competition for appropriate jobs. This phenomenon is not unique to Israel: The 2013 McKinsey report [5] indicated that there is a global phenomenon in which students find it difficult to be accepted to entry level positions, and that 50% of university graduates do not believe that their academic degree increased their employability and to find their place in the labour market.

The rising competition in the labour market brought about to a significant inflation both in the level of education that employers demand and in the number of college and university graduates who are working in a job for which they are 'overeducated'.

In the labour market we have seen in recent years some significant changes in the way workers are recruited, as the formal and traditional venues for job hunting such as placement companies, employment bureaus and want ads in the printed press are markedly less effective than informal venues that are based on personal acquaintances and referrals. A comprehensive study conducted in Israel in 2009 [cited in 3] by the division of research and economics in the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Employment clearly found that among job seekers who used informal methods while search for a job, the rate of those who found a job was almost twice as high compared to job seekers who implemented formal job hunting methods.

While personal referrals is an effective and inexpensive recruiting method, in which employees use their personal contacts to recruit new employees, in fact it replicates the profile of people who are currently employed in the organization and makes it difficult for members of economic and socially marginalised communities to enter the organization, hence decreasing their social mobility and accessibility to the labour market.

In high-tech, logistics and sales companies, for example, personal referrals are the main source of employee recruitment (60-80%).

Similar to the phenomenon of employees overeducated for their job, the difficulty many young educated people experience when entering the job market is a worldwide phenomenon that concerns senior economists. The OECD published in 2015 the Skills Outlook report [4]. This report found that in the 22 states who are members of that organization there are 35 million unemployed young people ages 16-29, whose chance to be unemployed is double than other age categories. Furthermore, the report states that the system of higher education does not help its graduates to acquire the necessary skills required for optimal integration into the labour market. The result is that employers refrain from recruiting inexperienced graduates since the cost of their training is too high.

Therefore, based on these results it is possible to construe that without intervention, an increasing number of young people will find themselves unemployed, and this trend is particularly true for students from economically and geographically marginalised communities. These students are often left behind die to the recruitment method of personal referrals, which prefers those who are better networked in the first place.

Thus, what are the possible solutions to this problem?

In the aforementioned OECD report [4] there are two recommendations related to young college and university graduates:

1. Academic institutions and the business sector should work together to define the set of competencies that accurately reflect the expected skills from graduates of higher education institutions.

2. Bachelor degrees should include Work-Based Learning (WBL) as part of the academic program.

WBL is an educational strategy that provides students with practical work experience, in which their can apply their personal skills and those studied during their degree in order to enhance their employability. This strategy is achieved through an internship that accompanies an academic course.
Internship programs began in the late 60s in the U.S. and became prevalent and institutionalized in the 80s. These programs believed that intern are people who work in their field of studies during their academic training (or soon after its completion). The main purpose of those programs was to acquire practical experience that could help leverage these students' education to employment.

In addition to institutionalized internships, in which successful internship is a requirement for receiving a license to work in a certain profession (e.g., architecture, law, teaching, psychology, accounting, medicine, etc.), internships are offered to students in additional disciplines and professions which do not require an internship as a prerequisite permission to practice their profession or becoming employed.

"The Next Step" is the largest internship program in Israel. It was established in 2012 and its purpose was to build a bridge between higher education and the labour market, and to help young people to find a job appropriate for their education after graduation. The program was jointly initiated and developed by the Rothschild Caesarea Foundation and Aluma (NGO) which focuses on programs for young people before, during and after their military or national service. So far, some of the costs of the program, especially the academic course that accompanies the internship are funded by the academic institutions. It is very likely that the program will be financed by the Israeli Council of higher Education starting in the next academic year, due to its strategic importance.

Since 2013, when the program was first implemented to date, the number of participants grew eightfold and currently it includes 1200 students across the country.

The Next Step programs in the southern part of Israel started later. Sapir Academic College is in the Western-Southern part of Israel. The program at Sapir started five years ago with 17 students. This year it included 111 students in eight departments, thus making it the academic institution with the highest number of participants in Israel.

What are the parameters for the success of an internship program?

1. The internship profile must be defined in advance, including the duration of the internship and the tasks the intern is expected to undertake.
2. The internship should be accompanied by both a member of the academic institutions and a mentor assigned by the employer.
3. The intern could work in a specific project or experience various skills and tasks.
4. There are no employer-employee between the organization and the intern, such as financial reimbursement or payment of travel costs.
5. The workplace internship is accompanied by an academic course taught by a lecturer whose specialty is the labour market and issues related to developing a career.
6. The course is usually given during the final year of studies, once every two weeks, and focuses on three aspects:
   - Gaining skills that could help the students gain access to the labour market (writing a CV, preparing and handling job interviews, preparing for evaluation and recruitment centres).
   - Gaining skills and competencies that are useful in the workplace (team work, dealing with evaluation and feedback meetings, how to request a raise/promotion, etc.).
   - Developing a future career plan –the next step in the career that the student wishes to take, the students' vision for themselves in the future, and networking skills.

In this program, each student works as an intern 5-8 weekly hours (up to 120 hours of internship) under the definition of practical experience. Students are carefully selected for the program, and throughout the year learn and practice various 'soft job-skills'. In addition, students are carefully selected before arriving to the organization where they intern, and the employer takes part in selecting the intern that seems most suitable for the organization.

2 METHODOLOGY

At the beginning of the program, students were grouped according to their field of studies. In each department, individual interviews were conducted by the campus-wide program coordinator and supervisor, and by the course's lecturer. The interviews were based on a semi-structured protocol, in order to clarify expectations from the course and the internship, and to evaluate the student's
commitment to the program. The number of students in each group was limited to twenty, to maintain small group dynamics and greater opportunities for lecturer-student interactions as much as possible. During the course, after beginning their internships, in each meeting a time was designated to students' feedback and to raising issues and challenges experienced at the organization in which they were placed, and these were recorded after each meeting. At the end of the course, students wrote a self-evaluation of their experience. In addition, some students chose to send the course's instructor or the program coordinator personal feedback about their experiences. These formative to summative comments were analysed using content analysis [6, 7] throughout the course.

3 RESULTS

Most of the students reported a high level of satisfaction from the practical skills they have learned during the course and from the ongoing process in the course that accompanied their internship. Most of them reported that the combination of the course and the practical experience during the internship helped them develop both professionally and personally. Some even reported that this course was the most useful opportunity throughout their studies to understand what is required for making the transition from college to the labour market. Quite a few of the students who participated in the course were recruited subsequently to the organization where they interned. Within a few months, others found positions in various organizations that were appropriate for their education and training. Here are some excerpts from what students wrote, which reflect the meaningful experience they underwent:

B., age 28, completed her degree in human resource management two years ago. During her senior year she specialized in worker-recruitment. B. wrote:

The internship program helped me connect theory and practice. I interned in a private organization, and I was part of a small recruitment team in which the roles were defined very narrowly. The internship helped me understand in which organizations I would like to work and what role descriptions are best suited for me. What you complete your degree it's as if the whole labour market is spread out in front of you. Even understanding what's "not right for me" was very helpful, it helped me focus and direct myself. In addition, the classes [in the course] in which we had simulations, mock job interviews, writing our CV, etc., helped strengthen my self-confidence and arrive prepared for the big intimidating labour market.

L., a second year student at the department of human resource management shared:

At the beginning of the internship I had a lot of doubts and concerns that I started the program in my second and not in my third [and last] year of studies. You could say that I felt disappointed that I didn't postpone my participation in the program. The class we had today, for example, made me look at the journey I went through at Soda Stream [a large, Israel-based manufacturing international company best known as the maker of the consumer home carbonation product a.k.a 'soda bars']. I found out that I developed professionally and personally quite a bit. I received many tools such as: Developing my interpersonal communication skills, creativity and thinking outside the box, strengthening my self-confidence and sharpening my abilities so that I could express them as best as I can. You could say that the "Next Thing" program was much more than "a line on my resume". The project gave me many tools, a sense of confidence about my future in the labour market and the belief that I could achieve the goals that I will set for myself and fulfill myself that way… I truly believe that I wouldn't have achieved any of these things at this stage of my life without the Next Step internship program, and without the amazing, supportive and professional team that accompanies me at Soda Stream.

R. is a third year student at the department of human resource management. She started her internship at Soda Stream and once her internship was completed she was accepted as an employee at the company. She wrote:

In the third year of my studies of human resource management, after working for three years in our family business, I took the courage and chose to participate in the Next Thing program, so that I could learn the labour market beyond the theory [that I've learned] and courses that I took. I did my internship at the Soda Stream company as a member of the worker recruitment team. The Next Thing program completed the puzzle made of every piece of content that I've learned theoretically. Terms such as 'applicant experience', 'motivation' and 'networking' received practical meaning...the program taught me how to present myself, how to emphasize my best qualities and how to cope honestly and effectively with my drawbacks. Through the program I
had the chance to see how a recruitment team works at a leading company, to be exposed to internal organizational processes, and to gain experience in recruitment and applicant selection, which were a practical experience with which I could proudly go out to the labour market! The program gave me an understanding of what the real labour market is like. I was an exit point from the family business to the real world, and it helped me get an opportunity I couldn't have dreamed of – getting hired following my internship at Soda Stream. The program’s team encouraged, supported and helped me from the start, expressed belief in my all the way, and improved me sense of efficacy and my will to give my best.

Last, but not least, is S., who graduate last year from the department of public administration & policy. S. has significant stuttering that makes it hard for her to speak, to make contact, and certainly to find her place in the labour market. She and the author started a process in which she started receiving speech therapy and regular sessions with a psychologist. Toward the end of the year, with the support of the Ruderman Family Foundation which helps people with disabilities, S. started an internship at the Israeli parliament with MP Isaac Herzog, who had the role of the Opposition Leader. Here are a few excerpts of what she wrote in a personal communication with the author:

Last week I started my first session with a speech therapist in my area. We practiced breathing, how to breath correctly during speech and more…I even got some practice assignments for next week…I truly hope that these treatments would help me at least reduce the stuttering, if only it were possible to eliminate it completely…

…Thank you for giving up and insisted that I’d talk during class. I felt today in class more at ease than I was last time. Not completely at ease, but I felt that I removed another barrier, and I felt that I was taking a more active part during class. Thank you for helping me to cope and not run away from the difficulty as I am used to do.

…I understand that the program coordinator updated you on my interview at the parliament, but I felt a need to fill you in. Both during the interview and after it I felt good about myself. During the interview I slowed down my speech a bit, and I breathed in between. I tried to implement what I’ve learned from the speech therapist. I felt that I impressed the interviewer (perhaps only I felt that way) and talking to you was definitely helpful, too. I left the interview knowing that I’ve done my best. I said everything I had to say and now it’s not up to me. I haven’t received an answer, yet. Next week I have an interview at the Museum of the Jewish People at Tel Aviv University. I hope to receive a positive response from one of those places.

…Hi, I wanted to let you know that I’ll start my internship at the parliament next Wednesday. Regarding the Museum, I was there for an interview yesterday, but I’ve reached a conclusion that the parliament is the best place for me, even for a short while.

…I wasted to let you know about the meeting I had last Thursday. Along with additional students I was invited to a meeting at Aluma’s offices, along with the donator of the Ruderman Family Foundation, the CEO of the Foundation and some representatives from Aluma. During the meeting each student was asked to present himself or herself, tell about the internship and in general about the process he or she underwent. I don’t know how…I simply presented myself, said that I have a mild speech problem and it went smoothly from there on. My therapist says that she thinks that I improved greatly. I felt that, too, I felt so good about myself that I didn’t give up. At the end of the meeting I wanted to say one more thing – that it was due to the program that I received a lot of confidence. Before the program it’s likely that I would have refrained from speaking in public and today there’s been a great change in me. Thanks to you. You were definitely a lecturer for life. Thanks for the amazing process I went through at the Next Thing program. I feel that I underwent an important personal process, learned a lot about myself. I’ve learned that I can cope with the stuttering, I cope with many challenges at the parliament, starting with the smallest things. Who would have believed that I would be able to call people on the phone? I’m having such a great time there, honestly.

These excerpts suggest that taking part in the program provided students from economically and socially marginalised communities greater opportunities to enter the labour market after gaining some important work-related soft-skills, and increased their self-confidence and sense of self-efficacy. Furthermore, in some cases it appears that the program contributed to a significant personal change.
4 CONCLUSIONS

The results of the program, as reflected in the students’ formative and summative feedback and in their reflections following the internship, suggest that from the interns’ perspective, the organizations support and contribute to their entrance to the Israeli labour market. In addition, the internship and the accompanying course provided students from diverse backgrounds a fair and equal opportunity. The practice of internship enables many young people to expand their social-professional network, to gain occupational experience and to acquire a relative advantage for the job market.

From the perspective of employers who chose to incorporate interns, joining the program has many advantages: It is an opportunity to use interns’ help to implement stalled projects, to train their veteran employees in mentorship and support for novice workers, to strengthen the organization’s ongoing activities, to train veteran employees in mentorship and guidance, to increase existing activity in the organization, to instill a youthful atmosphere, and to train future employees without having to invest unnecessary resources.

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REFERENCES


