

## Summary

Internships are important for university students to gain work experience and develop their skills before transitioning from education to the workplace. During an internship, a student can learn workplace culture and gain insights about their future career planning. Universities also recognise the importance of internships; The Hong Kong Polytechnic University has made internships a compulsory graduation requirement since 2005/06<sup>1</sup>.

However, COVID-19 has severely disrupted the internship planning of students. The number of Internship vacancies has dropped and have changed to become virtual. According to the Joint Institutions Job Information System (JIIS) database, there were 5,777 internship vacancies for university students between Jan-Apr 2020, a decline of approximately 32% from 8,468 for the same period in 2019<sup>2</sup>. In response to the pandemic, the government has encouraged corporations to adopt a “Work From Home” strategy<sup>3</sup>, leading the trend of virtual internships. As internship opportunities decrease and the work model has changed, this report explores ways of enriching students’ internship experiences in the next normal.

Given the restrictions on face-to-face internships, tertiary institutions have developed alternative options. Virtual internship (i.e. online internship) has become the main strategy and covers communication and management skills training: requiring interns to conduct research for enterprises<sup>4</sup>. In the business sector, both Hong Kong<sup>5</sup> and international corporations<sup>6</sup> have launched some innovative virtual internship programmes. As the current internship model has changed, so future internships will become more diversified in the next normal.

The continuing COVID-19 pandemic, changing skills-demand in the next normal and advancement in technology have all affected the development of student internships. This study aims to examine the impact of the changing internship model on students and the support they need. We will also explore ways to enrich both students’ internship and their learning experience with the aim of equipping students with the future skills required to align with social development trends and workplace demands.

The study collected information through four means: literature review, online questionnaire (with 877 university students who intended to join an internship this year), and interviews with 21 youth cases and 5 experts (who are familiar with student internship development), conducted during September and October.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Hong Kong Polytechnic University.(2020). About WIE. Retrieved from <https://www.polyu.edu.hk/sao/cps/career-services/internship-programmes/about-wie/>

<sup>2</sup> Sky Post (May 7, 2020). The number of tertiary internships has dramatically decreased by 30%.

<sup>3</sup> News.gov.hk (July 23, 2020). Govt work arrangement extended. Retrieved from [www.news.gov.hk/eng/2020/07/20200723/20200723\\_150304\\_822.html](http://www.news.gov.hk/eng/2020/07/20200723/20200723_150304_822.html)

<sup>4</sup> Same as 2.

<sup>5</sup> Hong Kong Economic Daily. (May 14, 2020). New World promotes virtual internships to recruit 100 university interns.

<sup>6</sup> TOPick, Hong Kong Economic Daily. (July 16, 2020). Citibank's changed its internship into virtual model. Retrieved from <https://topick.hket.com/article/2697543/>

## Discussion

- 1. Internship experience is important for students to help them begin the transition from education to the workplace. All parties should help students to explore possible options when fewer internship opportunities are available.**

Student respondents recognised the importance of the internship experience. According to the survey results, the most important objectives for participating in internships are: to understand workplace culture (51.9%), create a more attractive resume (51.0%) and apply knowledge in an actual-work context (44.7%).

However, with the adverse effect of COVID-19 on the economy, corporations have less demand for student interns, resulting in a significant decline in internship opportunities. Of the surveyed 877 university students who intended to join an internship this year, 20.7% of the internships were either cancelled or postponed; more than a quarter of the students (27.3%) failed to find an internship.

An internship programme is one of the channels for companies and organisations to identify future talent. Internship for students helps with learning and career planning. All parties can explore possible solutions for student internship during the pandemic to help develop opportunities for students.

- 2. COVID-19 has changed the internship model, leading to the development of virtual internships which has created more insights for future opportunities.**

The internship model has changed during the pandemic. The Survey result has showed that for those 457 students who participated in an internship during 2020: 54.3% had a virtual internship; 9.7% had their internship switched to training or internship offered by schools; a quarter (25.2%) experienced adjustments in internship content; 17.3% had their internship duration shortened.

Virtual internships have become more popular as COVID-19 has limited face-to-face internships. Those students who experienced a virtual internship thought that it increased flexibility at work (74.2%), saved money and time (65.3%), and also allowed them to become more familiar with the trend of working digitally (48.4%).

An interviewed expert pointed out that enterprises have changed their operations in the next normal. As flexible working arrangements (e.g. "Work From Home") become more popular, virtual internships will become a trend. The mindset of employers has changed, they are also more open-minded to new and flexible internship models. Virtual internships enable students to continue working when such face-to-face opportunities are restricted. In the future, virtual internship can encourage more opportunities and flexibility in the student learning experience.

- 3. While face-to-face internship has its own importance, virtual internship also has its advantages. A future hybrid model can provide a more meaningful learning experience for students that is in line with social development trends.**

Nearly 80% (79.7%) of the students surveyed thought that virtual internships could not replace face-to-face internships. In addition, nearly 20% (19.0%) of the students hoped that future internship models would be 100% face-to-face, while 60.7% hoped that it could be 70%-90% face-to-face with a certain percentage of virtual internship.

Face-to-face internship has an irreplaceable importance by providing a solid platform for students to directly experience workplace culture and to gain hands-on experience. However, within the context of COVID-19 and advancements in technology, more enterprises have adopted flexible working models. The experts interviewed pointed out that it is important for students to acquire the skills acquired through both virtual and face-to-face internship. This would be in line with social development trends and industry demands, so students are well-equipped to meet new challenges after graduation. Future internship can adopt a hybrid model to provide a more beneficial learning experience for students.

- 4. Difficulties that students encountered during virtual internships included fewer opportunities to experience work culture, low communication effectiveness, fewer learning opportunities and the lack of a sense of reality. Virtual internship is also limited by industry and job nature. It is worth exploring how to improve the virtual internship model to enhance students' needs.**

For the 248 surveyed students who had a virtual internship, 65.3% said that they lacked the chance to communicate with other colleagues; 59.3% felt that virtual internship lacked the sense of reality; 57.7% thought that actual working opportunities decreased.

Youth interview cases also revealed the difficulties they faced during their virtual internship. These included little chance to experience the work culture, low communication effectiveness, lack of working resources (which led to fewer learning opportunities) and limitations of virtual treatment and assessment which lacked the sense of reality.

In terms of support, 68.0% of the students surveyed thought that closer communication between intern and their supervisor would enhance the effectiveness of the virtual internship. More than 40% of students considered the provision of essential working software (43.9%) and pre-internship orientation (40.3%) by institutions were important supports for virtual internship.

Experts interviewed suggested that internship institutions can provide more learning opportunities for students, set up a virtual internship protocol, maintain two-way communication with interns during and in the pre-and post-internship periods. However, students can also take the initiative to set up clear working objectives and schedules with their internship supervisors. Schools can provide more support and training for students, and maintain a close connection with different industries. When

using virtual internship, all parties can make good use of virtual platforms and various software to enhance communication.

5. **Other than virtual internship, there is a need to explore other learning opportunities for students who lack internship experience. These can include providing platforms and opportunities for students to apply their knowledge at community level.**

As internship vacancies decrease and virtual internship is not applicable to all job natures, there is a need to explore other learning experiences, such as applying knowledge at community level. The education department of a local university has, for example, arranged students to design a series of free online lessons for primary and secondary school students in the community.

Different parties can take an intermediate role to organise student learning activities outside the classroom. This would provide students a platform for skills training and a way to apply their knowledge in real-life contexts.

6. **In the next normal, employers will require students to have multiple and updateable skills in an ever-changing environment. Students should be more pro-active to equip themselves with the essential skills to handle future job-market challenges.**

An expert interviewed observed that a significant number of enterprises have undergone transformation in the next normal, including changing business model and emphasis. Employers are demanding updated and diverse skillsets from students in this changing environment, especially information technology skills.

It is important to equip students with both hard and soft skills in order to meet future challenges. Digital skills have become increasingly important, while soft skills such as creativity and innovation are now indispensable as people's lifestyles continue to change due to the pandemic.

The Survey result revealed that students reacted positively even when they lost their internship due to the pandemic. Out of the 420 students who missed their internship opportunity: 54.5% worked part-time and temporary jobs, 37.1% students explored new interests and skills, 36.2% revised their academic knowledge, 36.0% learnt new industry-related knowledge on their own.

Under the next normal, workplace structure and patterns have changed and society requires new talents and updated skill-sets. As internship and other learning experiences are important channels for students to acquire these skills to help adapt to the next normal, all parties can provide more support to students' skills development through various means.

## Suggestions

Based on the above findings and discussion points, we have the following suggestions and recommendations. The aim is to improve the effectiveness of virtual internships, to enrich students' other learning experiences outside the classroom, develop students' diverse skills and prepare students for a smoother transition from education to the workplace.

### 1. ***Set up a virtual internship protocol and information kit***

#### A. Virtual internship protocol with pre-internship materials.

Companies can set up an internship protocol and information kit, so interns can get to know more about the workflow of their virtual internship programme. This protocol can include clear internship targets, working guidelines, as well as sufficient information on the job nature and background. In this way student interns can have more understanding of the job in the absence of face-to-face interaction.

#### B. Launch a virtual buddy scheme and increase two-way communication.

The company can launch a virtual-buddy support scheme, which allow students to get in touch with colleagues other than the internship supervisor. Each Buddy has the role to introduce company culture to students, support them and exchange ideas. In this way, students can have more social interaction with other colleagues during the virtual internship.

The company can also hold an online sharing section which allow interns to share their knowledge and strengths to other colleagues. As a result, such knowledge-sharing would create more working opportunities for students, improve their understanding about company culture and extend their social circle.

### 2. ***Schools and NGOs can provide other learning opportunities for students and develop a virtual internship platform***

#### A. Social Community Schemes.

Schools and NGOs can co-organise social community programmes that allow students to apply their academic knowledge in real-world scenarios. The content can be aimed at social community schemes, public health promotion programmes and problem-solving initiatives. Students can apply technology and develop problem-solving skills throughout to enhance their knowledge and skills.

As corporations deal with the various challenges in the next normal, students can also participate in social community schemes (e.g. design new marketing strategies and product concepts) for companies in this realm.

#### B. Job experience sharing and skills training.

Schools can organise job-experience sharing sessions so students can have more understanding about the actual workplace environment and culture, and equip themselves with the skills to deal with virtual internship situations.

Schools can also provide training for students which include practical digital skills, as well as soft skills such as creative thinking and flexibility. Students would then possess up-to-date and diverse skill sets to cope with the next normal.

C. NGOs can develop a one-stop online virtual internship platform.

NGOs can set up a one-stop online platform which provides information on virtual internship skills and vacancies. They can invite large enterprises to share the successful experience of organising virtual internship and act as intermediaries to invite more Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) to provide more virtual internship opportunities. NGOs can also provide internship matching services and the necessary support for internship institutions and students.

**3. *The Government could expand the overseas internship subsidy scheme to cover overseas virtual internship schemes.***

The HKSAR Government has schemes to subsidise students to participate in international exchange or internship activities to broaden their horizons. The study recommends expanding the scope of funding to cover overseas virtual internships.

**4. *Students should take the initiative to acquire diverse skills to cope with the next normal***

Students can develop diverse skills, especially IT-related skills and keep up-to-date with social trends and demands. Students need to be flexible, equipped with good communication and collaboration skills, think creatively, and adjust their mindsets to tackle future challenges.

Students can actively participate in career-related activities and skills training organised by the University Career Centre, or other organisations, that include both face-to-face and virtual programmes. When students have an internship opportunity, they should be more active in the internship process to enrich their own learning experience.