

The value of virtual internships as authentic assessment in developing the future generation of economists

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Personal and Professional Development (PPD) courses in the Greenwich Business School have long contained employability as a key element. In the department of Economics and International Business (EIB), PPIBE was the second year PPD module divided into two parts. The first term and assessment were Employability focussed, the second term and assessment were aimed at preparing students for their third-year research project. In 2020/2021 we changed the design and delivery of the employability part to include a compulsory virtual internship.

For the purposes of this discussion, 'virtual internship' refers to asynchronous tasks, devised by employers, accessed via a web platform – www.theforage.com. The Forage is a global platform, with a strong collection of brand names running virtual internships including Microsoft, Deloitte, Accenture, and many more. Virtual internships are distinct from remote internships, which are traditional in person experiences re-engineered to be done at home.

PPD courses have long suffered with a credibility problem amongst our economics students. The faculty wide response is a new, compulsory but not credit bearing module called Future Paths which will replace from 2021-22 the module being discussed here but will retain the virtual internship experience piloted in EIB.

In EIB there was a need to address students' calls for more practical and real-world assessment on PPIBE module, which will not only help them learn about the professional skills they need but which will actively help them develop those skills. It also aims at addressing employers' calls for graduates who have these types of skills, which are normally obtained through placements, but currently the number of students enrolled in placements is far from ideal.

We therefore thought of introducing a piece of assessment which would: 1) require students to perform tasks that replicate real workplace challenges; 2) Retain an academic element, through a reflection that in asking students to adopt models of reflective writing enables them to develop life-long learning skills, critical skills, and self-awareness; 3) provide some scaffolding through asynchronous forums, guest speakers, and tutorials. The internship allows students to self-evaluate by comparing their performance with an ideal one, and at the end students received personal and detailed feedback on their reflection.

Authentic assessment requires students to perform tasks that replicate real world challenges. The VI does so. Students are not assessed on how they did on the VI (but completing a VI was part of the grade – 20 marks), but on their ability to reflect on the VI experience. The VI reflection contributes to make this an authentic assessment, as the ability to reflect about one owns weakness, take stock, identify future actions and the ability to effectively present in video are things future graduates will be expected to do in graduate schemes and employment.

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We all remember the uncertainty of the spring summer of 2020, so choosing to embed a new activity needed to come with a large amount of flexibility. We kept the assessment light touch; we wanted the focus to be on the doing of the virtual internship rather than the doing of the assessment. As such, students were given a choice of either a 7 – 9 minute video presentation or a 1000 word reflective report. There were also 4 asynchronous Moodle forums that ran alongside the 4 weeks of teaching. These offered students the opportunity to share and discuss knowledge and information about recruitment processes, what employers are looking for, networking and interview skills. Contributing to these forums earned 10 marks, submitting the certificate of completion of the virtual internship earned 20 marks and the remainder was based on the reflection; overall this was 40% of the module grade.

The reflections were generally positive in tone, with students appreciating the employer-led nature of the virtual internship, and the opportunity to discover a possible career option.

The student satisfaction was also shown in the module evaluations, where the overall satisfaction was higher than in the previous three years.

The success of this experiment means that virtual internships will be embedded into the faculty wide Future Paths modules in 2021/2022. We have the University's ethical approval to do a thematic analysis via N-Vivo of the reflections, and to match the emerging themes with students' personal characteristics to assess whether perceptions of value vary across different groups. We'll potentially also undertake a qualitative follow-up analysis to gain a better understanding of the results. We look forward to deepening our understanding of students' experience in doing virtual internships and are exploring collaborations with departments in other universities as they consider embedding virtual internships in their programmes.