

Exploring Student Perceptions of Their Learning Through Flexible Internships

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ABSTRACT

The Covid pandemic has required a more flexible delivery of student internships, but how do international students think about what they have learned from their internship experience? This article follows a mixed-mode pragmatic approach to explore student perceptions of internship as a form of experiential learning. The views of a cohort of applied management undergraduates were investigated soon after the completion of different types of internships: company placement, offshore, blended and student-run Green Office projects. Surveys and focus groups provided insight into students' motivation as interns, what they felt they achieved and the capabilities they valued the most, as compared to earlier research into the perceptions of business employers. Findings indicate that, as with employers, verbal communication, teamwork and problem-solving are among the most valued capabilities. More surprising, however, is the learners' regard for independence, responsibility and ethics. While these can be interpreted in various ways, the effect of the Covid pandemic on workplaces and practices casts a new light on the students' perception of their internship experience. Meanwhile, the most striking difference between the student groups was the high level of awareness and commitment of Green Office interns. These findings suggest the following improvements to practice: more attention to student perceptions in the flexible delivery of internships; re-evaluating the expectations of stakeholders; the further development of Green Office to engage students, provide powerful internship experiences and develop self-efficacy beliefs that will promote sustainable approaches for a better future.

Keywords: work-integrated learning, flexible internships, capabilities, employability, sustainability

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1. Introduction

Internships provide students with some of their best opportunities to learn from experience and have become an important ingredient in their education for a successful career (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Student interns are immersed in real-life, work-related situations in their chosen vocational field, developing their knowledge, skills and identity in a way that enables them to “take explicit account of the learning which occurs within and between the different contexts of education and work” (Guile & Griffiths, 2001, p128). But what do students themselves think of their own learning? Looking back, how do they view their internship in terms of their skills development, their employability? These are questions we set out to explore by asking applied management students at our campus about their internship experience. This article will analyse their perceptions with regard to the learner capabilities which they feel are most useful for employment in the professional field of their internship.

1.1. Learner Capabilities

Learner capabilities are the transferable, non-discipline specific skills that graduates are expected to have in today's ever-changing world of work (Stephenson, 1998). Often referred to as 'generic' or 'soft skills', they also include qualities, attitudes and values, and can range from communication, leadership, teamwork, independence, to creativity and even critical thinking, resilience or sustainability awareness (Otago Polytechnic, 2021). Our research focuses on the capabilities which students consider to be the most important for completing their internships and preparing them for future employment.

Internship students are able to develop their capabilities through hands-on, active involvement in workplace situations rather than classroom-based or online simulation exercises. As with apprenticeships or work/study programmes, internships are a method of experiential learning where "the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied" (Kolb, 2014, p.5). They provide opportunities for students to apply their learning, both discipline-specific and generic, in a real and complex professional setting. More broadly, they allow them to "discern, acquire, adapt and continually enhance the skills, understandings and personal attributes that make them more likely to find and create meaningful paid and unpaid work" (Oliver, 2005, p.61).

1.2. Internship Experience

It is of course not enough to have been in touch with an organisation or physically present in a workplace for graduates to have gained in employability. This is especially true if their internship did not bear any relation to the professional field they have studied and intend to work in, or if they were merely involved as observers, or performed only menial tasks (Stirling et al., 2017). One of the key challenges for higher education providers is to ensure that their students' internship experience is valuable and appropriate, instead of falling back on the familiar assumption that "every experience is educational" (Moore, 2010, p.11). The relevance of an internship is crucial to the way it is perceived by students, whether in terms of its connection to their coursework or career goals (Hergert, M. (2009). Other factors like the level of challenge and skills development also play a part (Drewery & Pretti, 2021). Furthermore, the quality of the learning opportunities afforded by a student internship will have an impact on assessment. Internships can be classified, along with other activities within organisations, as high authenticity / high proximity types of work-integrated learning (Kaider et al., 2017). Good internship tasks are highly authentic (i.e. similar to those done by professionals) and highly proximal (i.e. close to the professional settings in which they are usually performed).

1.3. Flexible Delivery

Both authenticity and proximity were inevitably compromised by the Covid pandemic, which led to an extended period of lockdown in our city last year. As in many countries around the world, our internship programme had to be redesigned (OECD, 2021). We aimed to provide international students with assessed work-integrated learning that remained as highly proximal and authentic as possible. To this end, we adopted a more flexible approach to delivery with four different options (all of them with related projects):

1. a deferred conventional company placement
2. a shorter work placement combined with an initial online internship project
3. a work placement in the student's own country
4. a student-run sustainability project with internal and external partners based on the Green Office model (Green Office Movement, 2021).

The new programme gave students a choice between either completing an in-person internship with a host organisation or performing online tasks for an internship project, or a combination of both. But unlike simulated internships, none of these options could actually be “defined by the absence of any direct interaction between the intern and a real-world employer organisation” (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018, p.3). In other words, their general purpose was not to replicate the challenges of an authentic work environment where students assume the role of an intern and communicate with their peers and mentors as they would with colleagues in a workplace setting. In all cases, the roles which our students took on as interns were entirely real. Even the Green Office students were constantly establishing and maintaining contact with external organisations for the purpose of acting on sustainability in the real world.

In the wake of the pandemic, the question as to the relative merits of in-person versus remote internships has become even more pressing. According to Criso et al. (2021), their analysis of a total dataset of 358 participants in two distinct cohorts of students in East Asia, one completing an in-person internship and the other a remote internship, did not reveal any significant differences in the gain of transferable skills from the NACE (National Association of Colleges and Employers) framework of career competencies. Whereas in-person students performed slightly better in terms of critical thinking / problem-solving and teamwork / collaboration, they were outperformed by remote students in terms of global & intercultural fluency, and their learning was matched by comparable gains in most other areas (Criso et al., 2021, p22). However, it remains the case that further data is needed, whether on remote internships or more generally on flexible work-integrated learning, before a definitive equivalence can be established between in person and other types of unsimulated work experience.

It is in the context of this debate on how the pandemic has affected work-integrated learning that we developed new models of internship for our applied management undergraduates. Green Office students received work experience which may have been “different” to that chosen by the other groups but was nonetheless intended to be equally relevant. Just as employees throughout the local economy had to adapt to new working practices introduced in order to cope with Covid restrictions, the Green Office project presented similar challenges. Nor should students be left to face such challenges entirely on their own, whatever their choice of internship. All our options were aimed at including at least an element of “social presence”, allowing interns to become part of a wider community, build interpersonal relationships and communicate with all parties concerned in a trusting and meaningful way (Bryant & Crowther, 2020). In a study of social isolation during lockdown in Australia, researchers found that social support, although not related to reduced worry and distress, “was significantly predictive of engagement in coping behaviours” (Moore & Lucas, 2020, p. 369). The same probably applied to the post-lockdown situation in which our students completed their flexible internships, with support from their tutors, colleagues and peers. It is true to say, however, that it was sometimes difficult to ensure full support from SME employers who were themselves struggling to stay afloat (Cusmano & Raes, 2020).

1.4. Student Perceptions

In this article, we are going to examine the different ways in which a cohort of international students perceived their recent internship during a difficult and transformative period in the world of work. It seeks to understand how they think about what they have learned from this experience, more specifically about the capabilities they have developed and which they consider to be the most significant for the careers they wish to have. By focusing on their perceptions (at a collective and individual level), we can find out how successful they feel they

have been in developing both useful skills for their future work and an awareness of their employability. For as well as their skills acquisition, it is also the students' "understandings and personal attributes" that will affect their likelihood of gaining "meaningful employment" (Oliver, 2005, p.61). Their own perceptions of their employability, that is to say how they view and convey the relevance of their learning in the context of requirements and expectations in the labour market, may have a significant impact on post-graduation employment outcomes. Clarke (2017) draws attention to perceived employability as a factor to be integrated into our conception of how higher education graduates achieve their full potential. This raises the question of how well prepared our students believe they are for their intended destinations as business graduates in the current job environment and its possible evolutions.

2. Method

The work we have undertaken on student internships follows on from a wider project to investigate "the relationship between capabilities and vocational education outcomes for learners and educators" (Otago Polytechnic, 2021, p.3). Our own project is a case study aimed at capturing a variety of perspectives on these capabilities. We adopted a mixed-mode pragmatic approach in order to provide both quantifiable data for identifying and comparing the more general views expressed, and qualitative data for a deeper understanding of experiential learning in practice. The qualitative dimension of this research is framed within a constructivist paradigm where knowledge is co-created with our intern students and individual perceptions can be described in their subjectivity. As summarised by DeLay, "The process of knowledge construction is a combination of the influence of social structures and individual role" (DeLay, 2008, p. 198). The design for qualitative data collection in our study therefore integrates both the student's individual voice (through an open-ended survey) and the social construction of knowledge (through peer group discussions).

Management students were invited to participate in a survey on capabilities soon after completing their internship projects. They had all taken one of the four internship options outlined in the previous section. A questionnaire was designed and checked for face validity and construct validity. Students were asked to identify the six capabilities (out of twenty-five) in the Otago Polytechnic Learner Capability Framework (Otago Polytechnic, 2021, pp.14-5) which they saw as the most important in the work they had done for their internship. They were also asked about their reasons for choosing these capabilities, the extent to which they had developed them as interns, and how or why they've been able to do so (or not). Of particular interest was the possibility of any differences that might emerge in the perceptions of students who were not in the same type of internship.

Otago Polytechnic's Learner Capability Framework was designed to help learners become "self-reflective practitioners with a highly developed awareness of their own learning pathway and development" (Otago Polytechnic, 2021, p. 6). The research programme to validate the framework for its implementation in curricula was undertaken in four initial phases:

1. employer interviews to identify the most desirable capabilities
2. analysis of interview material to pick out salient themes.
3. collection of narrative data from alumni
4. programme case studies and learner observations in class

The fourth phase "included a synthesis of the data collection to search for patterns of relationship between those engaged in the project" (Otago Polytechnic, 2021, p. 7).

The learner capabilities chosen by the students in our study were coded and quantified before being compared with relevant quantitative data from Otago Polytechnic's research. All the

qualitative data was also coded according to the type of internship students had done and the capabilities they had chosen to write about in their survey questionnaire, with sub-categories relating to each of the questions asked about these capabilities (as described above). This data was analysed in order to formulate questions aimed at exploring the students' thoughts and feelings on their internship experience in more depth, especially regarding capabilities. All the students in the survey were then invited to one of four focus group meetings (i.e. one for each type of internship) where the prepared questions were put to them for discussion. These online meetings were recorded and the transcripts carefully studied by both researchers (working independently) for discourse analysis of their content, using the same categories as with the survey questionnaire data, as well as useful background information about each participant's internship and achievements.

Since the students were discussing, during their focus groups, prepared questions around the most significant capabilities in the survey results, there were fewer capabilities involved in the transcript data. There were also a number of overlaps where participants talked about different capabilities at the same time (such as critical thinking and reflection, or responsibility and ethics). A final version of this qualitative data analysis was established by comparing and synthesising the work of each researcher, to be stored separately from the survey data. Finally, all the data collected through this process, both quantitative and qualitative, was re-examined and organised through an explanatory sequential design where the results of the quantitative research provide a platform for investigating the qualitative findings (Creswell, 2013, p. 40).

3. Results and Findings

3.1. Quantitative Research

17 students took part in the survey, 10 male and 7 female, most of them in their early twenties, and coming from a fairly wide range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds.. From a gender point of view, there were no significant differences between the views expressed by male and female students. The percentages for the ten capabilities which these students valued most, as identified through the survey, are shown in the following table:

Table 1.
Capabilities most valued by management students in fields relevant to their course

	capability	%
1	Verbal communication	94%
2	Teamwork	76%
3	Independence	47%
4	Problem solving	47%
5	Responsibility	47%
6	Critical thinking	29%
7	Creativity	29%
8	Communication in writing	24%
9	Ethics	24%
10	Sustainability	24%

By far the most valued capability was verbal communication at 94%. This is followed by teamwork, chosen by just over three quarters of the students. At the other end of the scale, just under one quarter of students thought communication in writing, ethics and sustainability were among the most important capabilities. Overall, these results are more or less what you would expect to find in a survey of this kind. There are some surprises however, notably the inclusion of ethics in their top ten capabilities. To bring these results into sharper focus, they can be compared to relevant secondary data on business employers (Otago Polytechnic, 2021). The procedures for this survey were similar rather than identical to ours. The participants (21 in total) were asked to choose and rank the 10 most important capabilities for business graduates. Therefore, what the employer survey shows are the capabilities which they prioritised (including those that were given equal rankings). Our own survey simply shows the capabilities that were most often selected by students. By placing the two sets of results side by side we obtain the following:

Table 2.

Capabilities valued most by management students / employers of business graduates

Students		Employers	
1	Verbal communication	1	Teamwork
2	Teamwork	2	Verbal communication
3	Independence	3	Interpersonal behaviour
4	Problem solving	4	Problem solving
5	Responsibility	5	Communication in writing
6	Critical thinking	6	Organisation
7	Creativity	7	Digital competence
8	Communication in writing	8	Cultural competence
9	Ethics	9	Reflection
10	Sustainability	10	Independence Responsibility

Note. The source for Employers is Otago Polytechnic (2021), p74.

The table reveals which capabilities are valued the most by participants of either survey, as well as patterns of resemblance (colour coded). Verbal communication and teamwork are in the top two positions, while problem solving is in fourth position. But there are also marked differences, and a number of interesting questions emerge from the comparison:

1. Do the students in our research value a) verbal communication, b) teamwork and c) problem-solving for the same reasons as the employers?
2. Why do they value a) independence, b) responsibility, c) critical thinking, d) creativity, e) ethics and f) sustainability so highly, as compared to employers? And conversely, why is g) interpersonal behaviour missing from the student results?
3. How do their views on communication in writing compare to those of employers?

3.2. Qualitative Research

We can look for answers in what students wrote in their survey questionnaires and what they said in focus groups. To ensure these answers are representative, contributions from as wide a

range of participants as possible need to be included. For employers' perceptions, meanwhile, we can turn to samples of employer comments from one-to-one interviews (Otago Polytechnic, 2021).

Overall, the employer research shows they are mostly interested in graduates who would be a good cultural fit for their organisation, and can help their business to grow. In terms of verbal communication (Question 1a), employers say they prefer employees who can connect with new clients, have genuine conversations (whether to chat or talk business) and relate to everyone, whatever their position in the company. Our student data, meanwhile, portrays verbal communication as the ability to function normally within the organisation. What students mostly talked about was how well they could communicate with teammates. While this is understandable for a number of our overseas students (i.e. those lacking confidence in their verbal ability), it doesn't really match employer expectations in Otago Polytechnic's research. Our students did not see interpersonal behaviour (Question 2g) as being in any way as valuable as the speaking skill. This would suggest that they view speaking more as a tool for getting things done than as a means of establishing rapport and building relationships. Interestingly, the most searching comments on communicating with clients came from an offshore student who did his internship in his first language.

The way students thought about communication in writing (Question 3) was much closer to how it was seen by employers. At times there was good awareness of audience and appropriacy in what the students discussed:

"I have mastered the format of business writing and how to make the content more standardised and more commercial."

"...[when you write] you should really consider (...) how you should convey your message in the organisation."

Perhaps employers focused more on the need for clarity and concision:

"... you've got to understand how to communicate properly in non-jargon terms, to make things understood."

"...actually the person [you're writing to] doesn't want to know everything (...), what they want to know is what's the answer, so you need relevance."

(Otago Polytechnic, 2021, p.75 & p.78)

Employers clearly prioritise team effort (Question 1b), as expressed in an interview where the employer drew a distinction between working independently and working in isolation: "We prefer the strength that's behind shared decision making. (...) Working independently is a great skill, but working in isolation is a weakness. So, we prefer that team approach which sometimes means that you sit down at your desk and work, but you're never independent, you're always connected in some way to the bigger picture" (Otago Polytechnic, 2021, p.75). Intern students, on the other hand, value independence (Question 2a) almost as much as teamwork. To them, independence is about fulfilling the requirements of the tasks they are given to do. As a student explained: "If an employee doesn't even have the ability to complete tasks independently, he has no chance to continue working for that company." In contrast to employers, students tend to look at independence more from the point of view of an individual employee than from that of their organisation or their team. They see the challenge of their internship as one of getting the work done properly rather than connecting with colleagues and corporate objectives.

As regards problem solving (Question 1c), employers are looking for "active problem solvers" who can fix problems on the spot and provide solutions for clients and the organisation as a whole (Otago Polytechnic, 2021). Students appear to agree with this and some even describe issues they were able to deal with. "Interns can solve problems" one of them pithily remarked.

But as with teamwork, they don't have the same kind of general perspective that employers have on what they could do for colleagues, clients and the workplace (or collaborative space). They are also likely to have a more short-term view of both the problems they encounter and the solutions that are needed.

Like independence, responsibility (Question 2b) seems to be more important to students than it is to business employers. Almost half of students chose responsibility as an essential attribute. It may be that inexperience is a factor here. It is worth remembering the age of these students, for whom time management, meeting deadlines and so on can be a real challenge. Students might come to their internship with a lack of confidence in these areas, perhaps due to their track record on previous courses. Take for example the student who admitted to always waiting until the last moment before starting an assignment (but whose attitude changed completely during the internship). While in most jobs it is simply assumed that employees will act responsibly, at least some students see this kind of behaviour as one that needs to be acquired in order to be ready for employment.

Critical thinking (Question 2c) is also a capability that is often brought to the attention of management students. It is highly valued by some participants in our survey who believe, for instance, that it is "the most important capability which we ever develop ourselves, especially while doing management." Business employers, on the other hand, are less inclined to value critical thinking in this way. As shown in table 2 above, they are more interested in reflection, which is focused on their employees' ability to improve their performance and ultimately on making the organisation more efficient. They are certainly not going to value critical thinking if it leads to procrastination and task-avoidance.

It is perhaps not surprising that, as with critical thinking, employers do not share the students' enthusiasm for creativity (Question 2d). After all, creative endeavour can easily be misconstrued as "working in isolation", with its attendant danger of people doing their own thing instead of identifying with organisational goals. Most of the students who talked about being creative were involved in Green Office. For them, it represented a way "to get people to look at your work", to catch the attention of businesses and "attract more students and staff" into their project. Meeting Green Office objectives became a means of realising their creative potential as project managers.

As already indicated, ethical behaviour (Question 2e) was the most unexpected capability to make its way into the list of results for our student participants. Those who discussed it were interested in the confidentiality of client information, company account details, etc. Such concerns obviously reflect the growing awareness of cyber-crime and online access to documents in the population at large. But while employers no doubt share these concerns, they don't put the same store on ethical conduct as being a capability to look for in a business graduate. Once again, it's more something they will take for granted about people they are likely to employ.

A moral dimension is likewise to the fore in the prominence of sustainability (Question 2f) as one of the capabilities most often selected in our survey. It is obviously of great significance to Green Office students, and also valued to a lesser degree by the other participants. Less predictable was the enthusiasm and conviction with which those involved in Green Office were able to speak about their internship in general and sustainability skills in particular. This was as true of the less fluent members of the team as it was of the more eloquent ones. The following quotations about sustainability highlight the personal commitment fostered by a Green Office internship, as compared to the more passive perspective of other students:

"It is a thing which everyone must follow." (work placement student)

“Before that, I was (...) just talking about the subject, but now I am actually concerned about being sustainable and taking initiatives..” (Green Office student)

All of the Green Office interns gave striking accounts of how the project affected their motivation:

“I find that we have to constantly adapt and we have to constantly look forward to our next week, even our next month.”

“I was always late [with my work]. It [i.e. Green Office] just pushes me to do the job. (...) I'm just thinking about how to start doing the job early.”

One of them also made some damning observations on the prevalent attitude of the businesses they dealt with:

“I think they're still not ready to participate. (...) They just want to show that they're doing sustainability but that's all.”

In the end, the most tangible finding to become apparent in our study is the positivity of Green Office students when reporting on their engagement with the project and the capabilities which it enabled them to develop. Their contributions really stand out when compared to those of the other student groups in our research, whether in terms of the depth and detail that most of them went into, or simply the way they saw their internship as having affected their behaviour.

4. Discussion

4.1. Internships in Times of Covid

In many ways, the Covid pandemic has only served to accelerate the process of worldwide economic disruption which was already under way in the first decade of the twenty-first century (Oliver, 2015). As well as the lock-down of workplaces, massive changes to employment practices and work habits have been brought about as a result. New forms of student internships are required not only to maintain existing programmes but also to help them adapt to these changes. While Dean & Campbell (2020) make the case for “new and alternative models” which go beyond conventional work placements, their argument holds true for all types of internships. In times of Covid, internships are not “substitutions for placements, but instead opportunities to engage students in the changing nature of work and learning” (p.361). Therefore, instead of simply trying to replicate (in a virtual setting) the same type of work placement that we had before, we opted for a more flexible model of delivery. Our primary objective was to respond to the varied needs of learners in challenging and unpredictable circumstances. In other words, our decision was based first and foremost on necessity. Nevertheless, it enabled different priorities to come into play. The constraints of the pandemic provided an opportunity to reshape our programme in a way that mirrored the transformations taking place in the wider world.

What students need from their internship is to experience for themselves the realities of this changing work environment. More than anything, they have to learn “to be flexible and adaptive to manage uncertainty, ambiguity, and unpredictability, rather than acquiring a fixed set of skills” (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017, p.89). Seen in this light, our data on the capabilities which internship students identified as the most useful also reveals something about their attitude towards adapting to different work settings during the pandemic. While their views were congruent with those of employers on essential points, the divergences tell us as much about their awareness of current changes in the world of work as they do about their employability (in the narrowest sense of the word). By contrast, the data on employer

perceptions that we used was collected just before the start of the pandemic and does not reflect how these might have changed as a result of Covid.

4.2. Independence, Responsibility and Ethics

Independence was valued to a significant extent by students who, in some cases, were left to manage situations with a reduced “social presence” due to Covid restrictions and their effect on the economy. One student, for example, recalled dealing with a fire alarm for which she felt that she hadn’t received adequate training or instructions. As there were only a small number of guests in the hotel where she was doing her internship, the manager was not on site at the time. When she contacted him by phone, he advised her to use her own initiative in order to improvise a response to the situation. Our internship students also witnessed the rapid growth in remote working during successive lockdowns, which tends to require more self-monitoring and autonomous task completion. When taken in this context, the fact that independence was put almost on a par with teamwork in their choice of key capabilities for employment would now appear to be more to their advantage. As one student reflected in a pre-Covid study of a regional internship programme in Australia, it is in fact possible to see autonomy in terms of “being flexible and seeing the bigger picture” (Cord, Bowrey & Clements, p. 59). Such a degree of reflection on the nature of independence was entirely missing from the other students’ responses in that particular study, nor was it explicitly evidenced in our own, but might still be relevant to the attitude of internship students today.

Similarly, the importance that our students attach to responsibility can be seen at least partly as a consequence of the pandemic. “During my internship,” one of them explained, “I had responsibility because there were not many staff [whereas before, there would have been]”. Here the student saw responsibility in terms of performing a role where you take decisions, but implicit in this answer is the accountability that comes with this role. Another student made the connection with Covid-related difficulties more explicit when he wrote that acting responsibly “provides a sense of purpose and, moreover, helps to build resilience amidst adversity on an individual and societal level”. The implications of Covid for the way employees are expected to behave applies to ethics as well as responsibility. In fact, these terms seem practically interchangeable to some students, one of whom described “following ethics” as being “the primary thing that we had to keep in mind”, before going on to talk about responsibility as something that is “really important in any field that we work in.”

4.3. Green Office internships

But while such attitudes to independence, responsibility and ethics were shared by students in all internship groups, it was the Green Office interns who emphasised the importance of creativity:

“To be a good problem solver, you need to think outside the box and think creatively.”

“I had the opportunity to think creatively in the Green Office projects. Many times, I came up with creative ideas.”

They set out in good detail the strategies they adopted in order to achieve their objectives, as illustrated by the following (edited) extracts:

“We were making newsletters on a weekly basis and also I made a poster for the external businesses. (...) We also designed a logo for the Green Office story too.”

“I was managing all social media platforms for the Green Office. (...) So I had to post different content, such as photos, videos and sometimes newspaper articles and stuff.

(...) And we also used the platform called Canvas to create posters and information sheets. (...) From that process I have gained more creativity.”

They not only tried out different approaches and techniques that were new to them, but had the courage to learn from their mistakes and start afresh when they needed to:

“The thing was initially (...) we made basic plans to engage students and everything. It wasn't very effective. The results were not very good, but then we changed the ideas and we got some better results.”

As well as creativity and problem-solving, communication and teamwork were recurrent themes in their comments. In the end, their contribution to our research brought out the most vital lesson of the Covid crisis, which is that it “highlighted the importance of human connection, belonging, and creativity in the modern workplace” (Dean & Campbell, 2020, p. 356). Through their engagement with Green Office, these students did more than simply develop “a fixed set of skills” (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017, p.89). To return to the definition of employability proposed by Oliver (2005), their internship was ultimately aimed at enabling them to “discern, acquire, adapt and continually enhance the skills, understandings and personal attributes that make them more likely to find and create meaningful paid and unpaid work” (p.61). The extent to which Green Office students became involved in this ongoing process of discerning, acquiring, adapting and continually enhancing their skills is evident from what they said and wrote. More than any other internship group, their work displayed the process of employability in its different aspects, as elaborated by Oliver (2005):

- discipline-specific and generic skills
- practice of these skills in context
- self-efficacy, i.e. the students’ belief in their ability to apply their learning in future
- their self-awareness regarding their learning

Green Office had a distinctive effect on the students who participated in the project, making them better able to decide what work to do, motivating them to do it as well as they possibly could and helping them to become more aware of how they were affected as a result. In the words of one of their team members: “You are really involved in the process, it's not just an internship.” Another Green Office intern reflected: “I'm personally happy because I've gained so much confidence.” Such comments reveal the degree of self-awareness that these students have attained through their respective internships. While there is no guarantee this will translate into achievements in their future work, their self-efficacy is evident in the strength of their conviction. Reviewing two decades of research into the role of self-efficacy beliefs in human agency, Pajares (1997) concluded that we should look to “students’ self-beliefs about their academic capabilities, for they are important components of motivation, self-regulation, and academic achievement” (p. 49). This must be equally true of learner capabilities and achievements in work-integrated learning.

5. Conclusion

While company placements have traditionally been taken as the most appropriate model for “work experience”, the Covid pandemic has been a catalyst for the creation of new types of internships. These not only provide adequate opportunities for students to develop their skills, but also to enhance their self-belief and awareness of their own employability. Our students’ perceptions of their internship experience revealed a more limited understanding of the most relevant capabilities than those of the employers to which they were compared. At the same time, these students learned to adapt to the transformations brought about as a result of Covid, particularly those who did their internship through Green Office. The way in which they

perceived the most useful capabilities for a successful career in the future was generally consistent with anticipated needs of labour markets in a post-Covid world.

This study has uncovered a range of views relating to the skills, beliefs and attitudes which prepare today's graduates for the world of work. One of its limitations is that it doesn't take into account how employers themselves will have been changed by the pandemic, as the employer data available to us was collected before its outbreak. Another shortcoming is that the Learner Capability Framework which we used did not include adaptability at that time. A twenty-sixth capability has been added since to make up for this: "Participates in behaviour change" (Otago Polytechnic, 2021, p.320).

Nevertheless, our findings suggest the following additions to pedagogical practice could usefully be made:

- i) being highly attentive to students' own perceptions (and the underlying reasons for them) in the flexible delivery of internship programmes,
- ii) re-evaluating the extent to which the expectations of interns meet those of employers (and vice-versa),
- iii) the further development of Green Office projects to engage students, provide powerful internship experiences and develop self-efficacy beliefs that will promote sustainable approaches for a better future.

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