Establishing an Internship Programme Within an Irish Further Education College

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Set on the north side of Dublin city, Killester College of Further Education (KCFE) offers full and part-time courses to adults of all ages. Each course stipulates that each student must secure work placement in a workplace and attend one day each week for the academic year. For certain courses, work placement can prove very difficult to secure. To counter this ongoing issue, the teaching staff and management of the college have been developing links with organisations and employers in the Dublin area to establish formal work placement arrangements. Since early 2018 the college has now entered into formal agreements with these organisations to create the Killester College Internship Programme. These companies are currently providing students with work placement one day per week.

Keywords: internship, reinforced learning, community of practice, employer engagement

INTRODUCTION

There are 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) within the Republic of Ireland. The City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETB) is the largest ETB in the Republic of Ireland. It delivers a broad range of educational courses and provides a wide variety of complementary and supplementary services, to over 12,000 full-time students and 17,500 part-time adult students and employs over 3,800 staff.

Killester College of Further Education (KCFE) is one of 23 colleges within the CDETB and is a centre of learning committed to providing education and training of the highest quality while striving to continually respond to the educational needs of the community.

Each of the 19 courses offered are accredited by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) at Level 4, 5 or 6. Each course is made up of at least 8 components and must include a component called Work Experience. This mandatory component stipulates that each student must secure work placement in a workplace and attend one day each week for the academic year. To graduate with a full QQI certificate means that each student must successfully complete their 8 components, including Work Experience.

For certain courses, work placement can prove very difficult to secure. To satisfy the work placement element of the work experience component, students can often revert to work placement that is unrelated to their area of study. This practice defeats the purpose of work placement, which is to reinforce the learning the students experience in the classroom with real-life exposure to that same material in a work place. In some cases, students don't get any work placement, and therefore do not achieve a full QQI qualification. To counter this ongoing issue, the teaching staff and management of the college are

continually trying to create new links with employers to facilitate work placement. In the last 2 years this work has led to what has now become known as the Killester College Internship Programme.

HOW DID THE INTERNSHIP PROGRAMME BEGIN?

Early in 2018, the college was contacted by a local Dublin-based IT Solutions company called Kedington. Ultimately, they found the traditional Irish apprenticeship model very rigid, so they came directly to us as educators to get advice on options for recruitment and/or training. The initial discussions centred around how Kedington continually find it difficult to fill vacant positions for IT Technicians and how our students find it difficult to secure work placement. During subsequent meetings the college and Kedington explored the possibility of working together.

It became the agreed position of all involved that Kedington could be a workplace where some of our IT students could complete their work placement, while the company could observe potential employees for future positions. These IT students would be from the first year of our 'Computer Network Technician and Cybersecurity' course. The initial stages of the programme proved very successful and the last 2 years has seen the number of companies grow to 6 and negotiations with several more are ongoing. The college has now also started to provide IT training courses in our evening classes to the full-time employees of some of those companies and are using this service as an incentive to develop links with new companies.

Working within Further Education, there are two main goals for the students upon graduation: providing each student the best possible chance for continuing their education and for the student to gain employment. The long-term goal of the programme has been designed to help fulfil the second goal. Gaining full-time employment within an IT setting is very competitive. We are trying to give our students the edge over other further education graduates and increase their employability by creating an environment so their learning is enhanced and they can take their place in society (Shields, 2013, p8).

THE STRUCTURE OF THE INTERNSHIP PROGRAMME

From the initial agreement with Kedington and KCFE, we called the new work placement arrangement the 'Career Development Programme'. It was so called because the intention was to try to give the students an insight into what it would be like to work in the role of an IT Technician. Over time the title changed to the Killester College Internship Programme, but the main focus remained the same. The following were the agreed procedures:

We created a document that gave an overview of the main curriculum areas within the Computer Network Technician & Cybersecurity course. This pointed out the learning outcomes that would be achieved at certain points of the academic year. The intention of this was to show Kedington what type of work they could expose the students to at specific times during the academic year in order to maximise their learning.

The students would spend one day per week on site with the Kedington technicians and engineers. The location of each job would vary depending on the needs of the company. The number of students engaging in the programme was 4.

Kedington would visit the college and address the students in class. On that occasion they would give an overview of the company to the students and what they could expect from the programme.

The selection process would be by interview. The interviews would take place in early October with the successful candidates starting the end of October.

As the academic year progressed, we continued to meet with Kedington every 8 weeks to discuss the progress of the students, any issues that had arisen since the last meeting and the programme itself. While only 4 of the students were engaged in the programme with Kedington, the rest of the class also benefited as Kedington arranged 2 site tours for the entire class. The first was to a large data cable manufacturing facility in Co. Wicklow and the second to an IT Infrastructure company in Co. Kildare.

Developments During 2018 – 2020

Since the formal agreement was made with Kedington in early 2018, formal connections with 5 new companies have now been established. They are as follows:

A large Italian investment bank (based in Dublin) agreed in April 2019 that they would meet with us to talk about the possibility of work placement for one the Computer Network Technician and Cybersecurity students. During the meeting it was agreed that the timeframe of one day per week did not suit them and that they would prefer a block placement. Instead, this allowed an opportunity to create a situation where one of our graduating first year students could start with the company in June and continue until the start of September when he/she would return to college for classes after the summer break but stay on in their work placement one day per week. At the time of writing the intern who secured the position in June 2019 will be finishing in May 2020 and we have agreed that another student will get the opportunity to serve as an intern in the company starting in June 2020.

A large Irish Pharmacy retail chain agreed in May 2019 that they would take on 2 students from our Pharmacy Assistant course for work placement. While there is very little in common with the content of the Pharmacy Assistant course and the Computer Network Technician & Cybersecurity courses it was agreed that at least the basic features of the Internship Programme should be consistent. Having completed the application process, the two successful students have been attending for work placement one day per week since October 2019. (At the time of writing we have secured a second Pharmacy retail chain who have provisionally agreed to take on two students for an internship starting in September 2020).

The IT department of a large private mental-health medical facility has agreed to engage with the internship programme. However, at the time of writing this has been delayed due to the outbreak of COVID-19 (Coronavirus). During initial meetings the IT manager has selected one student from the applications, but due to government workplace restriction the start time will be delayed until at least May 2020.

The European Headquarters of an Australian software company have agreed to engage with the internship programme. The start-time for the student was March 2020. At the time of writing this has been delayed due to the outbreak of COVID-19 (Coronavirus). Due to government workplace restriction the start time will be delayed until at least May 2020.

The Dublin office of a global e-commerce and web hosting company has agreed to engage with the internship programme. While the other companies have agreed to take students currently engaged in their course, this company agreed to offer an 11-month internship for up to 5 students upon graduation from their course. This was a very positive development of the programme as up to this point we only sought internships for students to satisfy the work placement element within their course. From negotiations that began in August 2019, the company ran interviews in February 2020 and two graduates were selected to begin their internship within the Network Development Engineers team in May 2020. (It should be noted that one other student who was not successful in obtaining an internship was called back for interview for a full-time position within one of the company's data centres. The result of that interview is currently pending.)

Following the success of the Internship Programme within the Computer Network Technician and Cybersecurity course it seemed like an obvious step to broaden the programme to include the Pharmacy Assistant course. The aim is to continue to attract more companies and to expand the Internship to include all the courses in the college. So far, an informal community of practice has been established in the college and more tutors are seeing how beneficial it can be for the students. It is envisaged that this community of practice will develop into a professional network and enable the dissemination of good practice and the sharing of good ideas so we can continue to build on the progress so far (Hargreaves and Fink, 2009). As the tutor of the Computer Network Technician & Cybersecurity course the author realises that social-professional relations have been broadened and improved due to an increased level of communication with a growing number of people within the college (Struyve et al., p209, 2014). This broadening network of contact currently being experienced is helping to promote the idea of the

internship programme across the college and the success stories are now being heard and retold by an ever-growing number of people.

Since the creation of the Internship Programme, 34 students have been involved as can be seen in table 1.

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TABLE 1
TOTAL NUMBER OF STUDENTS INVOLVED IN THE INTERNSHIP PROGRAMME

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Academic Year	Number of Students	Course
2018/2019	4	Computer Network Technician & Cyber Security Year 1
2019/2020	5	Computer Network Technician & Cyber Security Year 1
	1	Computer Network Technician & Cyber Security Year 2
	2	Pharmacy Assistant Course
	18	Kedington Employees
May 2020	4	Computer Network Technician & Cyber Security Year 2

Changes to Be Made for Continued Progress Into the Future

Much success has been experienced with the programme so far. To date there are 6 companies and 16 students who have been or are currently engaged with it. Added to this we have and extra 18 students in the college on a part-time basis completing their IT training, bringing the total to 34 students. However, in looking back over the development and progress of the programme there are some changes that could be suggested for continued growth into the future.

Firstly, there is already a level of engagement within the college with industry partners. While most are in an informal capacity, the tutors of those courses could have been included in the initial stages of the programme. In some cases, this has led to some teachers feeling left out. This was never the intention of the programme, but anecdotal evidence would suggest that on occasion some teachers are suppressing negative feelings to accommodate emotional norms at the workplace (Berkovich & Ori, 2015, p.133). This has the potential to create a toxic atmosphere in some departments. An example of how this could be improved would be to survey each tutor and see what links they have previously established and see what elements are working well and what are the pitfalls, as they see them, of establishing work placement. This collegial approach would give us a more informed and unified approach when communicating with new companies.

Secondly, in order to boost the chances of establishing links with companies we will continue to approach companies where graduates of the college are now working. While the idea of the Internship Programme has been presented to companies in the past and they are very interested in the idea, a major barrier to success has been the restrictive protocols of their Human Resources department. This hurdle was never envisaged previously, but it is clear now that this will be an ongoing issue. To counter this problem, having a pre-established relationship may help in this regard.

Finally, a clear incentive should have been established before we approached any companies. There were no clear incentives to offer the companies that were approached in the early stages of the programme. This should have been highlighted as a potential problem earlier on in the process. The need for an incentive was born out of the idea that at its heart, the Internship Programme has been developed out of a transformational leadership approach. The programme to date has increased the awareness about what is important for the students, the college and for society (McNeill, 2018, p.11). Driven by this heightened awareness the following main incentives have been developed to help generate new links and to sustain our current links with companies:

Covering the Cost of Employee Training

In August 2019 the college became aware of the Skills to Advance government funded scheme (SOLAS, 2019). This scheme allows for the costs of upskilling employees in the private sector to be paid

for by the Irish Government. In return for the commitment that Kedington have shown so far, it was agreed that IT training would be provided (Cisco CCNA) for 18 of their IT technicians (see Table 1).

Block Work Placement of Up to 3 Months
Each of the courses in the college has one day per week built into the timetable for work placement. The other four days the students are timetabled in structured classes in the college. The experience so far is that most companies would prefer to take on a student for a block of placement (approx. 6 months), rather than one day per week. This is the timeframe that is used by some 3rd level institutions. The Irish Further Education model does not have the facility to accommodate this within the current timetabling structures. Our recent experience with setting up a link with the Italian investment bank highlighted this when they initially said they could only work in 6 month blocks. Ultimately, a three-month block was agreed upon and from there the student could work on a one day per week basis. Further blocks of time were generated from the academic year holidays that could be availed of if the business needs of the company required more time from the intern. Overall the blocks of time during the year are listed in table 2:

TABLE 2
BLOCKS OF TIME FOR WORK PLACEMENT BASED ON ACADEMIC CALENDAR 2019/20

Block of Time	Dates
1 week - October	28th Oct – 1st Nov
2 weeks – February	17th Feb – 28th Feb
1 week – October	28th Oct – 1st Nov
2 weeks – April	April 6th – April 18th
3 weeks - May	May 11th – May 29th
3 Months	June, July & August

To complement the two previous incentives, the college was invited to present the Internship Programme to the PLC (Post Leaving Cert) Programme Improvement Advisory Board in SOLAS in October 2019. Within their strategic document SOLAS stated the need for continued development in the area of traineeships and work based learning models (2018). Seen as an opportunity to showcase the successes so far, it also served as an opportunity to display the urgent need for an incentive to offer to companies. Shortly after the meeting, verbal confirmation was given that a sub-committee would be set up to generate ideas of incentives to offer to companies.

While the developments of the programme so far have been very empowering, there are a number of tutors in the college that are opposed to the idea. These tutors have refused to take on any leadership roles citing a lack of time and an ever increasing workload. At no point has any extra time been given out of class to concentrate on the task of developing the Internship Programme. As pointed out by Wenner and Campbell, teacher leaders would be unable to do their jobs without some sort of time allowances (2017, p155) and for as long as this is the case a college-wide adoption of the Internship Programme will be very difficult to realise.

HOW DO THE STUDENTS FEEL ABOUT THE PROGRAMME?

At QQI Level 5 and 6 the students are at the 'understand' layer of Bloom's Taxonomy (Krathwohl & Anderson, 2009). Overall, the work placement is geared to reinforce the learning that the students have experienced in the classroom. In doing so it is hoped that the students will be encouraged to experience their learning at the 'application' layer where they will be executing tasks and carrying out duties in a real-life setting.

At the end of the student's work placement they are required to fill out a questionnaire designed to illicit their level of learning within the placement and their overall experience (Chisnall, 1993). The

students were asked questions about their satisfaction with the work placement, if it helped to reinforce their learning in the classroom, what the best thing about the programme was for them, and if they would recommend the programme to future students. The responses were very positive, and a selection of the questions and their answers are as follows:

Do you feel your work placement helped your learning of the classroom material?
"real world examples helped to ground and actualise many ideas and IT concepts".
"the work placement put the material from the classroom into practice".
"the knowledge gained on work placement continues to be very helpful in understanding the concepts in class".

What was the best part of the work placement for you?
"I gained valuable contacts within the IT community".
"I was provided with the opportunity to complete vendor certification".
"It helped me gain an insight into the IT industry"

Was there anything you learned on your Work Placement that you did not cover in class?
"we were exposed to hyper-scale data centres and how they worked"
"we upgraded the college WiFi"
"I got to use so much specialised hardware"

Would you recommend the programme for future students?
"Absolutely. It allows for a smooth transition from education into employment"
"it gave me an appreciation of the daily roles tasks of network administrators and IT staff"
"100%. it was a great opportunity to prove oneself early on in one's career"

CONCLUSION

The key points of the Internship Programme are to allow the students to experience a workplace setting and to reinforce their learning within the classroom. Both have clearly been achieved. In creating the Internship Programme the students' capacity for learning has been expanded while also giving them an insight into what their career path may be. The Programme has been greeted with universal praise with all students saying they would recommend it to future students and have summed up their experience with comments such as *"excellent"*, *"100%"* and *"highly recommend"*.

Having witnessed the powerful impact that the Internship Programme has had; it has encouraged us to continue the work with a sense of dedication and pride. Helping to reinforce the students' learning and affording them the opportunity to transform themselves into qualified and skilled graduates has been extremely satisfying. If the next 2 years are as productive as the last 2 years then we are confident that many more students can see those same benefits that even the most reluctant tutors will become involved in the programme.

One of the central reasons for this research was to introduce an approach to allow the students gain relevant work experience. While the arrangements made with the employers so far have been very successful, we are currently in negotiation with other employers and we hope to create better and more inventive ways that allow students to become engaged with real-life working situations.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a key finding of this research is that not only were the students highly enthused by their work placement, but additionally the tutors felt they became more engaged in their teaching as the students were more willing to learn.

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