

Work wonders

Work experience and internship opportunities are becoming increasingly popular worldwide, with people from more countries attracted to such programmes and a wider range of work destinations being chosen. GILLIAN EVANS reports.

The work experience and internship sector of the travel market is booming, and a number of factors are fuelling this growth. First, the competitive job market is making it increasingly important for people to gain as much experience as possible to enhance their CVs; second, a working experience in another country is highly sought after by employers; and third, companies themselves are increasingly eager to employ foreign nationals on a temporary basis so they can gain valuable knowledge of international business practices.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of work experience programmes (excluding, for the purposes of this article, volunteer programmes): internships in professional companies, which are generally unpaid and have the main aim of enhancing a student's experience for a future career; and work experience, which is usually paid and useful for students wanting some general experience of working in another country and to improve their language skills.

Diverse options

Some operators specialise in only one career-specific area, such as Eurointerns in Madrid, Spain, which offers internships for newly qualified teachers or those thinking of becoming a teacher. Ivo Heemskerck at Eurointerns, explains, "We wanted to provide a practical non-academic programme for people interested in teaching but with no prior experience. The programme does not require either academic or professional experience in EFL, nor does one have to be a native English speaker," he says.

Working Holidays in Germany, based in Regensburg, operates in a different niche. It provides work positions that enable the participant to immerse himself or herself in everyday life in Germany. The work is usually provided on farms and in family-run hotels, where participants receive board and lodgings, and are paid pocket money of €52 (US\$70) per week.

Meanwhile, US companies, Intrax Cultural Exchange in San Francisco, CA, and CCI: Center for Cultural Interchange in Chicago, IL, both offer internships and work experience programmes in a wide range of business areas. Explaining the benefits of internships, Sarah McNamara from Intrax states, "Our career training programme offers participants the opportunity to obtain practical work experience and enhance their career skill-set with US businesses." Joanna Flagler, from CCI International, adds, "Interns learn valuable skills

in an American company while improving their English. They also get the experience of living with an American family and the independence of commuting to and from their workplace."

At Intrax and CCI, the work experience programme enables participants to earn some money and travel during and after their programme. In this way, says Flagler, "They gain experience in working in an American environment while interacting with Americans from all socio-economic backgrounds."

CEI London in the UK also offers both types of work programmes. "The internships can last anything from four weeks to six months," explains Katy Creswick at CEI. "Internships up to four months are generally not paid and the service costs €400 (US\$453) per person. For an internship of more than four months employers make a financial contribution of UK£250 (US\$500) minimum. For these programmes, the candidate must be in full-time education and be a European national." The internship programmes do not include English classes or accommodation, although these can be added depending on the participant's aspirations and budget. CEI's work experience programme, which runs for a minimum of two months, is mainly in the hotel, catering and sales sectors.

Clear benefits

There are many advantages of taking such programmes. Stefanie Franke at Placement UK says that if a student is in a placement relevant to his or her training and future career aspirations, then "it's a chance to put all their theoretical knowledge into practice".

Student nationality

The maturation of the work experience and internship sector means that its appeal is spreading into new markets. Traditionally, both types of programme have been popular with European students. Sarah McNamara at Intrax Cultural Exchange in the USA puts this down to "the relatively higher household income, and more mature and experienced international travellers". She continues, "Additionally, European students are more accustomed to these types of programmes since they have been in existence for some time in their own countries." More recently, however, she notes growing interest from Asians and Latin Americans.

Joanna Flagler at CCI International in the USA, reports that their work experience programmes are popular with Russians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians and Moldovians, and students from other countries where "work opportunities are lacking for university students with little work experience". Meanwhile, their internship programmes have for the first time this year attracted South Koreans. "Universities there are stressing the need for real-world experience as well as a growing demand for English-language proficiency," she explains.

In South Africa, Nicky van Dyk at Magister Student Placement Organisation reports that they receive most interest for

their work programmes from Germany, Austria and Switzerland, but she adds, "We are starting to get more clients from France and the Netherlands."

However, one major stumbling block to the growth of the sector is visa issuance. "Certain countries in Latin America, Eastern Europe and Asia have stricter participant eligibility restrictions," relates McNamara.

Stefanie Franke at Placement UK says, "There are some very motivated and talented students who would like to do their placement in the UK. However, because of visa restrictions we can only accept students who are EU, EEA or EFTA nationals, or who already have a valid UK visa."

goes so far as to say that "the number of students seeking this experience is growing daily". She puts this down to the fact that "the European Union [funds] such programmes, [as well as the effects of] natural globalisation."

Maturing sector

A particularly welcome development in the work and travel sector is the increase in interest from potential

employers of internship and work experience clients, which has kept pace with student demand. McNamara says, "American host companies have become more interested in including participants from different countries in their workforce in order to learn about international business practices."

Similarly, Franke in the UK observes that more businesses in the country are becoming aware of the benefits of accepting an intern or work experience student on a placement. "Skill shortages in many industries in the UK have led to a rise in companies considering placement students," she says, but as employers become keen to embrace the idea of international interns, Creswick observes employer expectations have increased. "Employers have become more demanding with regard to the level of English and experience required," she explains.

Another area where employers can be demanding is in the length of the student placement. Franke from Placement UK, which arranges paid internships in the UK for university students, says that some universities are sending their students on shorter three-month placements. "This conflicts with the needs of companies, as they believe that a three-month placement is not sufficient time for a student to learn anything useful," she relates.

Looking ahead

Despite visa issues constricting the growth of the sector in some countries (see box left), demand for work placements looks set to rise steadily in the future as other travel markets mature and a wider cross section of nationalities are attracted to the idea of undertaking a work placement overseas. "Demand will continue to increase as the programmes become more popular in big markets such as China, India, Australia and Latin America," forecasts McNamara.

The range of destinations offering work positions will also widen as more people seek experiences outside the norm, as do Carmo Loureiro at Globalplacement predicts. Currently, English-speaking destinations such as the USA and the UK are the most popular choices for their work experience and internship positions, however, she also notes growing interest from clients in "southern countries", European Union member states as well as Asian countries.

At Globalplacements, enquires are growing day by day, do Carmo Loureiro relates, concluding, "In the future it won't be just a choice whether to do [a work placement overseas] or not, it will be necessary for successful career development!" ●

She continues, "Students can show real work experiences on their CV related to the degree they have graduated in. Hence, this vastly increases their chances of obtaining work after they graduate and also allows them to command a higher salary compared with those graduates who have no relevant work experience."

In South Africa, Nicky van Dyk at the Magister Student Placement Organisation which arranges unpaid internships for students in and around Cape Town, says, "The benefit of undertaking an internship in South Africa is that this can be seen as a learning experience for all involved. We offer great value to our students and invest in their personal development and education as well as their careers. The students also get the opportunity to experience a new working culture and travel while completing an internship, thus broadening their horizons and increasing their future career prospects."

Increasing demand

Most organisations active in this sector started up as a direct result of student demand. Van Dyk relates, "We decided to start an internship programme as we realised so many foreign students coming to South Africa wanted to combine work and travel and gain experience to further their careers," she says, adding, "We have been offering this programme for seven years and the demand is definitely increasing."

Creswick at CEI London, which has been offering work experience and internships since 1996, says, "We first started [offering work programmes] as we realised that more and more young people were looking to come to the UK to gain some professional experience and needed help in organising their trip. We have worked a lot in the past with local governments and universities in creating job programmes for young people from different educational and professional backgrounds."

Internships and work experience programmes are certainly a product of the 21st century, and placement agencies report healthy growth in both types of programme. McNamara says their work experience and internship programmes have "grown exponentially" in recent years.

At Globalplacement, an online "internship mediator agency" in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, Maria do Carmo Loureiro

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