Open market internships: what do intermediaries offer?
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ABSTRACT
Participation in open market internships by higher education students and graduates has significantly expanded. This has created growing opportunities for intermediaries or ‘brokers’ to organise and charge fees for placing individuals in organisations, either in their home country or abroad. Despite being voluntary, open market internships may be endorsed by universities motivated to confer on their students a labour market advantage. Despite being the subject of significant public concern, no published research has systematically addressed how internship intermediaries operate. This study examined the websites of 25 intermediaries to examine the functions of these businesses and the nature of the internships they offer. The findings show that the majority of firms offered placements in a variety of disciplines, partnered with prestigious universities and organisations, and promised a plethora of employability capacities as a result of participation. None directly promised participants success in acquiring a job post-internship but they did frequently suggest that internships had proven career benefits. The high program fees charged to participants may constitute a significant barrier to participation for those from less advantaged backgrounds. The results contribute to emerging scholarship addressing the patterns of participation in (open market) internships and other forms of work experience.

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ready graduates, provide their students with a labour market advantage, and demonstrate their responsiveness to the needs of industry (Grant-Smith and McDonald 2018; PhillipsKPA 2014).

Internship intermediaries, or brokers as they are sometimes called, appear to have become increasingly numerous and visible in the graduate employment field (Perlin 2011; Grant-Smith and McDonald 2018). They have also been the subject of significant public concern for undermining the graduate labour market, exploiting young people by extracting their labour and ideas for free, and entrenching class inequalities (Jacobson and Regan Shade 2018; Tweedie and Ting 2018). These critiques run parallel to those expressed about the expansion of work experience more generally, including that the practice has been positioned as an obligatory rite of passage to paid jobs (Discenna 2016) and one that places downward pressure on the wages of other workers (Siebert and Wilson 2013; Standing 2011). The conduct of internship intermediaries is often resistant to effective enforcement of national labour regulation (Gordon 2015), especially when their operations occur cross-nationally.

Despite the proliferation of internship intermediaries and the growing controversy surrounding them, no published research to date has systematically addressed how these organisations operate. This article begins to address this evidence gap through a detailed analysis of 25 internship broker websites. As well as describing their business functions, the features of the internships on offer are examined with respect to three key issues arising in the extant literature: employability capacities; employment outcomes; and opportunities for access. Before turning to the empirical analysis, a summary of previous research addressing work experience is provided, albeit that the terminology used to differentiate various forms of work experience is ambiguous. This literature spans several substantive fields, including unpaid work, employability, and youth education-to-work transitions.

Internships and employability

Research has demonstrated that in high income countries especially, the prevalence of organisation-based work experience has substantially expanded. In the UK, US, Australia, Canada and continental Europe, estimates indicate that somewhere in the vicinity of half of all higher education students or graduates surveyed had participated in at least one period of work experience and that the majority of these placements were unpaid (Carnevale and Hanson 2015; European Commission 2012; Kramer and Usher 2011; Oliver, McDonald, Stewart and Hewitt 2016). UK reports suggest that around 11,000 internships are advertised each year in a wide range of occupations, industries and organisation types, with the true number taking place estimated to be as high as 70,000 (Perlin 2011; Roberts 2017).

The primary justification for the expansion of work experience is that it enhances employability, through increased knowledge, skills and experience, and because they assist participants to match their human capital profile to labour market demands (Discenna 2016; Smith, Smith, and Caddell 2015). Work experience also ostensibly support individuals to establish connections with prospective employers and signal a student or graduate’s value in the job market. The recent emphasis on employability, which has been defined as ‘the perceived ability to attain sustainable employment appropriate to one’s qualification level’ (Rothwell, Herbert, and Rothwell 2008, 2), is influenced by the need to find work-based solutions to uncertainty about the number of secure jobs available in the future.

The specific components of employability vary but frameworks generally feature at least three core sets of capacities. First, employability models universally cite disciplinary content, knowledge and skills, sometimes referred to as ‘hard skills’, which are usually acquired through formal education and training (e.g., Dacre Poole and Sewell 2007; Hillage and Pollard 1998). Second, employability is believed to comprise career enhancing capacities, including opportunity awareness, career decision making skills (Clarke 2017) and job searching skills, which include résumé writing, interview techniques and self-presentation competencies (Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007; Hillage and Pollard 1998). The third core component of employability frameworks is generic or soft skills, which include self-
confidence, self-awareness, communication skills, efficacy beliefs, meta-cognition, and enterprise skills (Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007). Soft skills are usually gained not through formal education but via informal socialisation processes in families and communities, and through work experience.

Some employability frameworks acknowledge the conditions of the external labour market and personal circumstances such as family responsibilities, as being influential (e.g., Hillage and Pollard 1998; McQuaid and Lindsay 2005). However, policy discourses have tended to focus on the qualities of individual job-seekers, with limited recognition given to the influences of labour market structures and how opportunities are impacted, for example, by gender, ethnicity or social class (Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Smith and Neuwirth 2008). Critical accounts of employability frame the concept as ‘relative’ (Brown and Hesketh 2004) and also as contextual, relational, conflictual, and structured by opportunities, inequalities and power relations within social contexts (Boden and Nedeva 2010; Tholen 2015). This view acknowledges that a graduate may be ‘employable but unemployed’ in the sense of achieving objective measures of employability while failing to secure employment due to an oversupply of qualified graduates or insufficient labour market opportunities (Brown and Hesketh 2004, 217). Hence, employability depends not only on fulfilling the minimum requirements of a job, but also on their hierarchical position relative to other job applicants (Grant-Smith and McDonald 2018).

While participation in work experience has revealed higher ratings of job suitability and employability skills compared to non-participation amongst business employees (Pinto and Pereira 2019), the literature has also highlighted a number of cautions associated with attributing employability benefits to work experience. Benefits appear to depend on factors such as the disciplinary area of the participant (Milburn 2009); the extent of practices considered to be exploitative such as unethical tasks, risky physical activities and unreasonable workloads (Perlin 2011); the quality of mentoring and support provided to the participant (Matthew, Taylor, and Ellis 2010; McHugh 2017; Sanahuja Velez and Ribes Giner 2015); and opportunities to reflect on experiences through learning tasks and assessment (Jackson 2017; Matthew, Taylor, and Ellis 2012).

**Internships and employment**

It is important to distinguish between subjective employability benefits, as indicated by student satisfaction surveys, and employment or job outcomes. Students often report positive outcomes of their work experience on the basis that it improved their analytical or critical thinking (Kramer and Usher 2011) or provided a competitive advantage in the graduate marketplace (Cannon and Arnold 1998). Sanahuja Velez and Ribes Giner’s (2015) review of 57 peer-reviewed studies of the impact of internships identified a variety of student-defined benefits, including improved knowledge of career pathways, the enhancement of job and social skills, and improved employment outcomes in a career-oriented job following graduation.

Despite high levels of participant satisfaction with work experience, econometric analysis of employment outcomes is relatively scarce (O’Higgins and Pinedo 2017; Silva et al. 2016b). There is also the added difficulty of directly comparing studies due to differences in the work experience being examined (e.g., paid/unpaid, variable duration and/or quality, educationally focused or open market); the samples targeted (e.g., current students/graduates); how employment outcomes are defined (e.g., full-time/part-time); and the timeframe following the completion of the work experience. Some studies have found positive associations between work experience and employment (e.g., Hakkinen 2006; Joensen 2009) and negative associations between unemployment levels and mandatory internships and multiple, shorter internships throughout a higher education degree program (Silva, Lopes, Costa et al. 2016a). Analysis has concluded that paid internships are associated with better labour market outcomes (O’Higgins and Pinedo 2017) and job pursuit intentions (McHugh 2017) than unpaid ones. Explanations for this include that interns who are paid may be: higher quality; more motivated to invest in developing employability capacities; and able to focus on their internship because they are not burdened by financial hardship (O’Higgins and Pinedo 2017).
Other studies are less optimistic about employment outcomes arising from work experience. Data from an Australian prevalence study for example, showed that respondents who had participated in open market internships that were potentially unlawful (defined as involving the same work as that done by regular employees and which did not predominantly involve observing or performing mock or simulated tasks), were more likely than their peers who had completed apparently lawful internships, to be neither looking for work nor employed at the time the survey was completed (Author 2018). A recent study in the UK further suggested that university graduates who participated in an unpaid internship following the completion of their degree, earn less 3.5 years after graduation than peers who go immediately into paid work or on to further study (Holford 2017). Another study that examined unpaid, open market internships undertaken post-graduation in Germany (Cerulli-Harms 2017) confirms the negative employment outcomes identified in the UK study. Hence, despite the wide promotion of work experience by universities, organisations, and more recently, internship intermediaries, and the enthusiastic adoption of the practice by students and graduates, empirical support for positive links between work experience and employment is tenuous and incomplete.

**Equity of access to internships**

A key motif of debates about the link between work experience and professional labour market outcomes has been equity of access. Opportunities to participate in work experience have been identified in a range of studies as being influenced by class, gender, age and geographic location (e.g., Allen et al. 2013; Boulton 2015; O’Connor and Bodicoat 2016). Privately organised or open market internships may be especially problematic in terms of equity of access. For example, groups based in the UK such as the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions (Milburn 2009) and the Sutton Trust (2014) have highlighted that high status professions such as finance, law and politics are dominated by those from privileged backgrounds at least partly because wealthy families can fund their children’s work experience in high cost cities and utilise their networks to facilitate this experience in high status organisations. Indeed, Hunt and Scott (2017) argue that social class can stamp an imprint on the role of internships in the transition from education to employment, extending and even intensifying the process of socio-economic reproduction already evident in the education system.

There is some emerging empirical support for concerns about equity of access to quality work experience and internships. For example, Holford (2017) found that although graduates who had completed unpaid internships had lower earnings than peers who had entered paid work or further study immediately following their degrees, this salary penalty was significantly mitigated for graduates with professional parents. In essence, their financial and social capital provided a key advantage in accessing good quality internships that later facilitated opportunities to capitalise on their experience in the labour market. A further study by Hunt and Scott (2017), who compared access to paid versus unpaid internships amongst creative arts graduates in the UK, revealed that after controlling for factors such as grades, institutional reputation and prior placement experience, those from less advantaged backgrounds were less likely to participate in internships overall and struggled to secure paid internships in particular.

The entry of intermediaries into the internship ‘market’ may represent a new dimension of concern about equity of access to professional careers. Charging higher education students or graduates up-front fees to access unpaid work experience seems likely to constitute an additional barrier for low income youth who often struggle to cover their housing and living expenses while foregoing an income (Oliver, McDonald, Stewart and Hewitt 2016; Frenette 2013). While fee structures charged by internship intermediaries are currently unclear, this double burden appears to strongly favour those with financial, social and education resources (Curiale 2010; Frenette 2013).

This study aims to reveal new insights about internship intermediary firms, including where and how they operate and the kinds of internships available; examine what intermediaries claim to offer participants in terms of employability capacities and employment outcomes for the placements
available; and explore opportunities for access through analysis of the costs and inclusions of internships promoted by intermediaries. The results contribute to emerging scholarship addressing the patterns of participation in (open market) internships and other forms of work experience.

Methods

Sample and procedure
To identify relevant intermediary websites, a Google search was conducted in early 2018 using the term ‘INTERN’, absent the word ‘intermediary’ or ‘broker’ since most organisations of this type do not describe themselves using these terms. The first 20 Google pages were searched after which there was an obvious redundancy of new firms to add to the sample. Twenty-five internship broker websites were identified through this process. Only intermediaries with a .com address and those that clearly offered services that organised and placed interns in workplaces were included in the sample. Directory sites such as Glassdoor.com and Seek.com, which advertise internships posted by host organisations were not included. Given the focus on firms which were commercially orientated, organisations whose websites had urls with the suffix .edu or .org addresses were also excluded. Institutions with .edu addresses were usually universities advertising internships and those with a .org address were primarily non-profit organisations which did not charge interns for placements but operated as repositories for companies to advertise internships.

Analysis
A coding framework was developed in order to a) describe where and how internship broker companies operated and b) explore what the companies purported to offer participants through internships. Categories of results relevant to business operations were developed inductively from the information provided on the sample websites. The analytic categories employability, post-internship employment, and access, were pre-determined and informed by key themes in the employability and unpaid work literature.

Each website was coded in detail according to this framework, with the assistance of NVivo 11. The process involved clicking through all the major tabs available on each site, such as ‘Our Process’, ‘Parents’, ‘Apply’ and ‘Destinations’ to identify relevant text, and watching recorded videos where they featured on the site. When information aligned with a particular analytic category was obviously absent on the website, this was also recorded. Analytic categories and sub-categories, including examples from the data, are summarised in Table 1.

Results

Business operations
Table 2 summarises the features of the internship intermediaries examined, including the name of the company, the location of the organisation’s head office, the global scope of its operations, and the target discipline(s) of internships offered on the site. Most internship broker companies had

| Table 1. Analytic categories. |

| Analytic category | Data constituents |
|-------------------|------------------|
| Business operations | Location; Global scope; Target disciplines |
| Employability capacities | Disciplinary content, knowledge and skills; Career enhancing capacities; Generic or soft skills; Supporting strategies |
| Post-internship employment | Assurances of pathways from internships to jobs |
| Access | Costs and inclusions |
a global reach, with only five operating in a single country (e.g., Australia, US, China). Some offered prospective opportunities across five continents.

The majority of websites offered placements in a wide variety of mainstream disciplines (e.g., Health, Science, Law, Politics, Psychology) and a few were in niche fields such as wine studies, zoology, aviation, and luxury marketing. Only three companies specialised in a specific particular career field (e.g., child health, education, dietetics). Table 1 identifies the type of work experiences offered by each internship company. Business disciplines included marketing, accounting, finance, management, logistics, public relations and human resources. Creative Industries disciplines included entertainment, art, graphic and web design, acting, animation, fashion and cinematography. Built Environment disciplines included architecture, real estate and construction.

Affiliations and partnerships, including their global scale and duration, were frequently used as a means to demonstrate the reputational capital of the company. For example, broker firms frequently claimed they partnered with ‘some of the biggest and most prestigious universities in

| Site                        | Location            | Region of operations                      | Disciplines offered                                |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Australian Internships      | Australia           | Australasia                               | Nearly all academic disciplines                    |
| Internships Downunder       | Australia           | Australasia                               | Business; Creative Industries; Administration; Real estate |
| Budding Talent Rec'ment     | Australia           | Australasia                               | Information Technology; Engineering; Business      |
| Opportunity International    | Australia           | Asia, Africa                              | Business; Creative Industries; Journalism          |
| Smart Intern                | Australia           | Asia                                      | Built Environment; Education; Engineering; Business; Law |
| We Make Scholars            | China               | Asia, Europe, Nth America                 | Humanities; Science; Health; Engineering; Law; CI  |
| Internshala                  | India               | Asia, Nth America, Europe                 | Science; Humanities; CI; Business; Law; IT         |
| City Internships            | US                  | Europe, Nth/Sth America, Australasia      | Business; IT; Law; Creative Industries            |
| World Wide Internships      | Mexico              | China, Europe, Nth/Cent America, Asia     | Business; IT; Built Environment; Creative Industries |
| Global Placement            | Netherlands         | Africa, Asia, Australasia, Europe, Nth/ Sth America | Business; Education; Journalism; Engineering; Creative Ind |
| Placement International      | Not stated           | Australasia, Nth/Cent America, Europe, M/East | No disciplines listed                              |
| Cross Cultural Solutions    | USA                 | Cent America, Africa                      | Health; Education                                 |
| Connect 123                 | Not stated           | Europe, Sth America, Africa, Asia, Australasia | Business; Science; Health; CI; Engineering; Education; Law |
| Gap Year                     | UK                  | Australasia, Nth/Sth/Cent America, Europe, M/East | Science; Law; Health; Business; Education        |
| The Intern Group             | UK, US, Aus         | Nth/Central America, Europe, Asia, Australasia | CI; Business; IT; Science; Psychology             |
| Global Experiences           | US                  | Europe, Australasia, North America, Asia | Business; CI; Psychology; Law; Politics          |
| API Study                    | US                  | Asia, Europe, Central America, South Pacific | Business; BE; Education; Law; Psychology         |
| GVI                          | US                  | Africa, Central America, Asia, Europe, Australasia | Science; Business; Education; Humanities; BE; Health |
| All Access Internships       | US                  | North America                            | Health                                            |
| Go Abroad                    | US                  | Asia, Europe, Nth/Sth America, Africa     | Customised internships in all fields              |
| Maximo Nivel                 | US                  | Central/Sth America, Europe              | Education; Health; Business; Law                  |
| Internship Programs          | US                  | North America                            | Business; Creative Industries; IT; Engineering; Science |
| IAESTE                       | US                  | Europe, Nth/Sth/Cent America, Africa      | Science; IT; Built Environment; Engineering; Maths |
| World Internships            | US                  | Australasia, Nth/Sth/Cent America, Asia, M/East | 39 fields listed                                |
| International Internships    | US                  | Nth/Sth/Cent America, Australasia, Europe, Asia | Built Environment; Psychology; Science; VocEd    |

Table 2. Internship brokers, location, region of operations and disciplines offered.
the world’ (Global Experiences) and ‘some of the most prestigious organisations in the world’ (The Intern Group), although the latter were not always named.

Our 3126 partners span 137 countries across the globe. GoAbroad’s International Educators are affiliated with some of the most reputable travel organisations and education associations in the world [Go Abroad].

Internships were primarily targeted at higher education students completing, or having completed degrees at Universities or Colleges, although some sites also offered placements to ‘experienced professionals’ (Connect 123) or ‘young professionals’ (Placement International). Cross Cultural Solutions for example, suggested there were ‘an increasing number of scholarships available to youth … and retirees’. The term ‘internship’ was widely associated with a host of associated phrases including ‘an international adventure’, ‘experiential learning’, a ‘full-time, immersive in-person course’, and a ‘uniquely rewarding experience’. Eligibility requirements to participate in an internship were often vague or non-existent. Only two firms specified a formal application process such as the submission of a CV, cover letter, academic transcript, or employment references. Some sites required proof of insurance, functional English and evidence of a visa.

**Employability capacities**

A plethora of employability capacities – many of which are referred to in the mainstream employability literature – were promised as a result of participating in an internship. These were categorised as (1) disciplinary content, knowledge, and skills; (2) career enhancing capacities, including opportunity awareness, career decision-making skills and job searching skills, including résumé writing, interview techniques and self-presentation competencies; and (3) generic or soft skills, which include self-confidence, self-awareness, communication skills, meta-cognition, and enterprise skills.

Table 3 summarises the employability capacities – and they were often referred to using this specific term – that broker firms suggested would result from their placements. Some sites explicitly contrasted the employability benefits gained through work experience against those that could be acquired through formal education ‘outside the classroom’ (International Internships). At the extreme, Internshala, which operated in India, claimed they were ‘entrepreneurs trying to solve a very hard problem – the (near) failure of India’s education system’. As Table 3 shows, there was a clear emphasis on soft skills. For the many companies that facilitated internships outside of the participant’s country of origin, capacities were communicated using terms such as ‘international exposure’, ‘cross-cultural exposure’, and ‘global understanding’.

Work experience is more important than GPA, field of study, or the name of your school. You should certainly participate in a domestic internship, but that may not be enough to compete in a global economy where companies work with international clients, have global operations and employ a diverse work force (Study Abroad).

Non-academic benefits were additionally cited, especially the experience of living and working in global cities, such as Shanghai, where interns could experience the ‘heart of the action in the city

| Employability capacity                  | Examples                                                                 |
|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Disciplinary content, knowledge and skills | International competencies; Hard skills; Language skills; Professional certifications; Industry knowledge |
| Career enhancing capacities            | Resume enrichment; Extensive global networks; Improved marketability; Career identification; Career exploration and cultivation; References; Professional networking; Portfolio building skills; Career network expansion |
| Generic or soft skills                 | Confidence; Career aspirations; Personal growth; Languages; Cultural business etiquette; Adaptability; Independence; Flexibility; Self-reliance; Improved business skills; Global awareness; Self-reflection; Personal development; Soft skills; Intercultural fluency; Intercultural competencies; Global citizenship; Teamwork; Leadership skills; Patience and independence; Problem-solving; Critical thinking skills |
where East meets West’ or Sydney, where participants could ‘surf in the morning before work’ (Connect 123). Extra-curricular activities such as cooking, language classes and dance lessons were also heavily promoted.

Intermediaries described a range of supports, coaching and mentoring arrangements designed to ‘deliver the highest return on your educational investment’ (API Study Abroad), guarantee the quality of the internship experience, and/or support the acquisition of employability capacities. These included an ‘internship program supervisor’ (Australian Internships), ‘professional development tools and training’ (The Intern Group), and ‘weekly one-on-one staff mentorship sessions’ (GVI). GoAbroad had a review system which ostensibly provided ‘travellers a platform for interacting with future participants as well as their host organisations’ and had begun announcing its ‘annual list of top rated organisations and programs’.

Despite these provisions and the in-country ‘support’ that was frequently offered (see Table 4), there were few specific assurances of proactive oversight of the tasks and activities assigned to the intern in the workplace or a guarantee of learning outcomes. Firms instead used generic statements

Table 4. Internship costs and inclusions.

| Site                        | Deposit          | Program Fees                      | In-country support | Visa Assist | Insurance | Accom/Housing |
|-----------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------|-------------|-----------|---------------|
| Australian Internships      | AU$500           | Not specified                     | Yes                | Yes         | No        | No            |
| Internships Downunder       | AU$350           | AU$540                            | Not specified      | No          | Yes (work) No        |
| Budding Talent              | AU$110           | AU1,000 – $1,870                  | Not specified      | Yes         | Yes       | No            |
| Opportunity                 | None stated       | Not specified                     | Not specified      | Yes         | Not specified | No            |
| International               | US$1,295 – $2,995 | Yes                               | No                 | Yes         | No        | No            |
| Smart Intern                | None stated       | US$1,295 – $2,995                 | Not specified      | Yes         | Not specified | No            |
| We Make Scholars            | None stated       | Not specified                     | Not specified      | Yes         | Not specified | No            |
| Internshala                 | None stated       | 1,499–5,000 Indian rupees         | Not specified      | No          | Yes       | No            |
| City Internships            | US$450           | US$4,650 – $7,950                 | Yes                | No          | Yes       | No            |
| World Wide Internships      | US$350           | US$700 – $5,400                   | Yes                | Yes         | No        | No            |
| Global Placement            | None stated       | AU$4558 – $23,673                 | Not specified      | No          | No        | No            |
| Placement International     | US$550           | US$2,650 – $3,800                 | Yes                | Yes         | Not specified | No            |
| Cross Cultural Solutions    | US$350           | US$2,490 – $9,733                 | Yes                | Not specified | Yes       | Yes            |
| Connect 123                 | US$300           | US$2,150 – $2450                  | Yes                | Not specified | No        | No            |
| Gap Year                    | None stated       | £630 – £21,000                    | Yes                | Not specified | No        | Yes            |
| The Intern Group            | None stated       | AU$4558 – $23,673                 | Yes                | Yes         | No        | Yes            |
| Global Experiences          | None stated       | US$6990 – $7990                   | Yes                | Yes         | Yes       | Yes            |
| API Study                   | US$450           | US$4,750 – $7,995                 | Yes                | Not specified | Yes       | Yes            |
| GVI                         | None stated       | £1,600 – £7,000                   | Yes                | Not specified | Yes        | Yes            |
| All Access Internships      | None stated       | Not specified                     | Not specified      | No          | No        | Not specified |
| Go Abroad                   | None stated       | US$2,000–$5,000 per week          | Yes                | Not specified | Yes        | Yes            |
| Maximo Nivel                | None stated       | US$975 – $2,895                   | Yes                | Not specified | No        | Yes (host family) |
| Internship Programs         | None stated       | $US975 – $2,895                   | Yes                | Not specified | No        | Not specified |
| IAESTE                      | $US460           | 0 – Students are paid             | No                 | Yes         | Yes       | No            |
| World Internships           | US$757           | US$900 – $9,490                   | No                 | Yes         | Yes       | Yes (shared) |
| International Internships   | US$580           | US$2,800 – $6,600                 | Yes                | Yes         | Yes       | Yes (basic)   |
supporting employability such as ensuring ‘all our internships are beneficial training experiences’ (Internships Down Under) or adopting a ‘practice-over-theory coaching style’ (City Internships). Others focused on promoting the development of intangible capacities such as social and cultural opportunities. Budding Talents Recruitment was the only organisation to promise a ‘100% satisfaction guarantee’, where a replacement internship would be organised if ‘meaningful and relevant work experience is not provided by the host company’.

**Post-internship employment**

Unsurprisingly, none of the intermediaries directly promised participants success in acquiring a job post-internship and some were overt about this. Nonetheless, they did frequently suggest that internships had ‘proven career benefits’ and would assist interns to ‘get their foot in the door’ (Global Experiences) of a targeted industry. They also promised their internships would provide, for example, ‘the edge you need to negotiate future positions’ (World Internships) and secure ‘a powerful advantage when you return home’ (GVI). Budding Talents Recruitment suggested their internship programs were a means to ‘market directly to employers’ and boasted ‘up to 35% internship to job placement conversion rate’.

As the following quotations illustrate, several companies explicitly promoted direct pathways from internships to jobs:

> We boast a powerful track record in positively dramatically influencing the career trajectories of our students ….
> Our alumni get hired three times more quickly (2.5 versus 7.5 months) and earn 30 percent more ($45,000 versus $36,000) straight out of college, compared with US and UK national averages (City Internships).

International Internships suggested that unlike other companies, they offered ‘customised placements’ to ‘ensure that your internship more completely focuses on your academic background and gives you the career exposure you need before entering the full-time workforce’. Similarly, Smart Intern asserted that:

> ‘internships remain the single biggest opportunity for young, inexperienced students and recent graduates to gain experience and ultimately secure a better paying job in the workplace’

The benefits of taking up an internship with a particular firm were frequently framed as a necessary activity in light of heightened competitiveness amongst graduates for scarce jobs. Such claims are consistent with mainstream notions of employability that reinforce the idea that work-based experience is a solution to uncertainty about the availability of secure jobs. International Internships promoted to parents ‘the acquisition of skills that would last a lifetime and show potential employers that your child is the cream of the crop’. Budding Talents Recruitment further suggested in relation to the link between internships and jobs, that ‘about 35% of job vacancies are never advertised by the employer, they are filled through referrals, internal promotions and internships’.

> The fact is the world economy has entered a sort of new normal … The reality is that internships remain the single biggest opportunity for young, inexperienced students and recent graduates to gain experience and ultimately secure a better paying job (Smart Intern China Internships).

**Costs and access to internships**

A direct comparison across sites of costs and entry requirements was complicated by the myriad of inclusions and exclusions cited by each company. Customised and ongoing support throughout the internship was frequently used to differentiate the company from its competitors. Global Placement offered, for example, ‘pre-departure orientation materials and resources … an exclusive career navigation briefcase, and an onsite workplace and culture orientation’.
There was also a highly variable level of detail across firms about direct and indirect costs. Table 4 summarises internship costs and major inclusions across the 25 companies. Four intermediaries provided no pricing information whatsoever while others provided limited information with individualised quotes on application. Where cost information was available, fees were usually cited as a separate deposit/enrolment fee, often non-refundable, and which ranged from AU$110 (The Intern Group) and US$580 (International Internships) and a ‘program fee’ which ranged widely depending on the discipline, location, duration and inclusions of the particular internship but often amounted to several hundred dollars per week. Placement costs sometimes included visa assistance, insurance and accommodation, although in relation to the latter, they did not always specify if this was shared.

In-country support was usually included in program fees but airfares were always additional. Australian Internships required interns to pre-purchase and show evidence of insurance for the duration of the internship that included ‘medical, accident, travel and personal liability’; the latter which covered property damage up to $AU2 million. Additional minor inclusions included pre-arrival orientation, airport pick-ups, welcome dinners, transport cards, language lessons, in-country activities, training plans, counselling services, completion certificates and performance reports.

Advertised internships were almost exclusively unpaid although several websites suggested that host companies may offer a small stipend to support transport or ‘remuneration costs’, although the amount of remuneration was not disclosed. One company, Budding Talents Recruitment, which was linked to the Australian Government initiative called PaTH internships, specified that internships were unpaid by the employer for the first four to twelve weeks but that participants would instead receive an extra $200 a fortnight which topped up their income support payment. Another intermediary, Australian Internships, offered what they referred to as ‘paid training’ in hospitality, aged care and nursing. Global Placement was unique in that instead of charging fees to interns, it charged employers up to €1,000 to list internships. Only seven organisations mentioned typical days and hours of work associated with their internships. Costs were wide-ranging across companies depending on the location and length of the internship, which ranged from 2 weeks to a full year. None of the companies offered special assistance for low income students.

The high costs of internships was generally acknowledged, but as an investment in the future, and a range of strategies were suggested for prospective interns to fund their domestic or international work experience. These included seeking advice and information from their campus financial aid office; offsetting flight costs with ‘frequent flyer program points’; taking out a loan; crowdfunding; contacting local businesses; creating a payment plan; nd a getting a job and saving.

We know it can be daunting when you are faced with the prospect of raising the required funds to take part in a GVI program. However, with proper planning, a good imagination and lots of friendly determination, fundraising will be successful and can even be fun! … Volunteer Forever lets you set up a personal fundraising campaign … so that your friends and family can sponsor and support you! (GVI)

Specifcations on the visa requirements to enter a country where an internship was offered were sparse, though many sites offered ‘assistance with visas if required’. Australian Internships suggested they had been successful in ‘lobbying to have visa options [Training Visa 407] for all passport holders completing internships in Australia’.

Discussion

Despite the proliferation of internship intermediaries and the growing controversy surrounding them, no published research to date has addressed how these companies operate, nor the terms, conditions and outcomes of the internships they facilitate. Through an analysis of 25 internship broker websites, this study is the first to do so. No assurances can be made that the sample was precisely representative of all firms which organise internships on the open market. For example, although the term ‘internship’ is ubiquitous internationally in describing work experience arranged outside a formal course of study, even if a university ‘partner’ is involved, use of the search term
‘INTERN’ may have excluded intermediaries which utilised alternative primary phrases such as ‘work-integrated learning’ or ‘practicum’. The sample was also confined to sites written in English.

Most companies did not offer organisation-based supervision in support of learning outcomes and only one guaranteed a quality internship. They instead focused on the provision of support external to the work itself, such as orientation, safety, and extra-curricular and cultural activities. The sheer volume of positive testimonials on the sites suggest that many interns did indeed value their experiences. However, it is unknown how these testimonials were selected or if inducements were offered for narratives recounting positive experiences. Considering the value placed on internships by higher education graduates desperate to succeed in the labour market, it is unsurprising that interns will sometimes accept poor conditions whilst also espousing positive sentiments about their experiences (Swan 2015). The European Commission (2012, 8) has identified a related problem with signing up to work placements without full disclosure which is that ‘information asymmetry means that applicants … have real difficulties assessing the quality of placements before committing to them’.

Given that many internships organised via intermediaries appear to take place outside the participant’s country of origin, with or without the formal architecture of a course of study, and that up to a third of programs may be deficient in terms of either learning content or working conditions (Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion 2013), a misalignment of expectations and experiences may arise. Furthermore, the assumed discretionary nature of participation may be eroded and the decision not to participate may be made difficult as ‘individual choices … are subsumed by a wider narrative that emphasises the benefits of participation and the potential loss in terms of skills, employability and personal worth of not getting involved’ (Holdsworth and Brewis 2014, 205).

Of course, it cannot be taken for granted that an internship involving an education provider will necessarily result in quality outcomes. Regardless of its origins or how it is arranged, there needs to be an emphasis in every period of work experience on the development of genuine and meaningful work-based skills, experience and knowledge. Few countries have taken authoritative action to impose quality standards on internships. However, there are exceptions. These include in Europe (see European Union Council 2014; European Commission 2016) and particularly France, which mandates a tripartite arrangement with an educational institution and requires, through the Education Code, effective supervision by both the institution and the host organisation, with limits on working hours and remuneration for placements longer than two months (Hewitt 2018).

The data suggests a high level of support for open market internships from universities (partnerships with universities were prolifically cited), organisations (many hundreds were listed on intermediary websites) and, in the Australian case at least, governments (where intermediaries had successfully lobbied authorities for special visa arrangements). This level of institutional support seems to be somewhat at odds with growing concerns in the community about the potentially exploitative aspects of open market internship arrangements.

Advertised program costs consistently amounted to many thousands of dollars/pounds/euro, especially for programs undertaken outside the home country of the graduate. Additional costs such as airfares were not covered by any of the firms and the costs of visas and housing/living expenses while residing in the host country (and working without wages to cover these expenses) were covered only by a minority. The significant fees involved, including non-refundable deposits, were often rationalised as a sound investment in future careers and earning-capacity. Yet there remains a dubious link between internships and objective employment outcomes, especially if they are unpaid (Holford 2017; O’Higgins and Pinedo 2017). While some internships in specific disciplines were offered as paid arrangements, these were confined to only a few disciplines and countries. Hence, the strong suggestion that internships provide a direct pathway to a career in a desired industry does not necessarily match the empirical reality.
Even if we assume a positive link between work experience and employment, the high program fees charged by intermediaries may constitute a significant barrier to participation for young people from less advantaged backgrounds, further contributing to the problem of equity of access to well-paid and high status careers (Grant-Smith and McDonald 2018). In particular, there are questionable ethics associated with the suggestions made by some intermediaries that if their program fees are unaffordable, efforts should be made to crowd fund, seek financial assistance from others, or take out a loan.

**Conclusion**

This study examined the websites of 25 internship intermediaries to reveal new insights into the operations of these businesses and the nature of the open market internships they offer. The results contribute to emerging scholarship addressing the patterns of participation in internships and other forms of work experience; phenomena which have proliferated in industrialised economies over the last decade or so as they seek to address the ‘problem’ of youth un/under-employment and graduate outcomes. Young people, motivated to get a foothold in an increasingly tight labour market and often encouraged by the educational institutions they attend, have enthusiastically embraced opportunities to participate not only in mandatory or voluntary unpaid work experience facilitated through a course of study, but additionally in work experience organised through the open market. The legality, safety and ethics of all forms of unpaid work have been discussed in extant research (Hunt and Scott 2017; Perlin 2011; Stewart et al. 2018). Our distinctive focus here however was on internships accessed via intermediary firms on a fee-for-service basis. Scarcely visible even five years ago, internship brokers may be considered by some as a step too far and they have attracted a disproportionate level of concern for the welfare of students and graduates and with respect to equity of access to high status jobs.

Until now, little was known about these new and controversial entrants to the youth employment setting and hence, the study contributes to broader debates which sit at the intersection of education and work as it affects young people primarily, but also increasingly, other segments of the labour market. Yet the study did not include the thousands of open market internships advertised each year directly by employers on large job websites such as CareerOne, SEEK or LinkedIn. The contours and fairness of these arrangements also warrants attention in future research and almost certainly, greater oversight by universities and employment compliance agencies. However, as the findings here indicate, the sheer scale of placements on offer, and the idiosyncratic circumstances of each, complicates efforts to effectively monitor what is an ever-changing landscape and impose appropriate penalties on businesses which seek to extract free, productive labour from participants. The challenge for governments, universities, and employers, is to find ways to facilitate employability for all job-seekers, whatever their financial means. There is also a need to acknowledge the constraints of different labour market structures, whilst also ensuring that participation in internships does not come at an unacceptable cost to young people who, given the state of youth employment, may be ripe for exploitation.

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