

[Open Peer Review on Qeios](#)

Dignifying Lifelong Learning: The Case of Internships

Saikat Chakraborty¹, Sushmita Chakravarti

¹ Indian Institute of Management Calcutta

Funding: No specific funding was received for this work.

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to introduce a capabilities-driven perspective through the inculcation of the value of dignity within the context of lifelong learning (LL). Explicating the case of internships and its dimensions of equity, access and regulation, the article explores ways to dignify intern-employer relationships, arguably transitioning the organizational perspective behind LL, from a human capital perspective to a shared objective of human capabilities development.

The internship model of work-integrated learning is at the heart of LL, which has primarily followed a needs-driven perspective of human capital development. A dignity-centric approach to the dimensions of equity, access, and regulation, can elevate shared areas of development and introduce a capabilities-driven perspective that dignifies internship experiences for interns and employers. Through this lens, equitable treatment primarily addresses compensation, performance, and work quality in internships, while access and regulation introduce novel approaches to balance and govern intern-employer relationships. In doing so, this paper challenges the needs-driven perspective that dominates learning and development in organizations and offers a strategic vision for LL within the future of work agenda.

This short article is written as a viewpoint based on the author's learnings and experiences of teaching a masters' level course entitled 'The future of work and human dignity' and drawing particularly on the module of work-integrated learning. The perspectives have also been informed by informal discussions with practitioners considering the research spurring in this area.

Keywords: lifelong learning, dignity, internships, intern, employer.

Introduction

Lifelong Learning (LL) or systems and processes underpinning learning throughout life and work, is becoming a key focus of the future of work. The inclusion of LL within UN SDGs has broadened the scope of work-integrated learning to include wide-ranging opportunities of transforming life and work through technology-based skill identification and training.

However, the perspective behind LL—needs-driven vis-a-vis capabilities-driven—is rarely discussed. Whereas needs-driven perspective coheres with human capital approach that views skills as resources and pivots on top-driven organizational decision-making to reskilling, the capabilities perspective combines skills with the broader dimensions of human development through the cultivation of capability, freedom, and choice, emphasizing on equity and access in structural and economic contexts (Poquet and De Laat, 2021). Notwithstanding the challenges, opportunities exist to make learning experiences and working lives dignified. On that account, a shift in the organizational perspective can have a crucial role in shaping LL.

Internships

The internship model of work-integrated learning is at the heart of LL. While initially similar to apprenticeships, internships became integral to most professional degree programs and educational institutions, linking the academic and professional worlds. Evolving industry dynamics and societal demands caused internships to mature as a tool to fill skill gaps, transitioning within and between periods of employment and unemployment, and conscientious career planning. With technology-driven remote and virtual internships, prompted by shocks like the Covid-19, while opportunities became more accessible and self-directed, integration of AI and data driven approaches redefined the nature of work, performance tracking, evaluation, and skill development for future careers of diverse and inclusive roles. Notwithstanding the benefits of potentially improved levels of learning, modern-day internship experiences are exposed to the risks of exploitation and dehumanization due to increasing business competition, economic pressures, and the lack of regulation and shared expectations. All these make it important to analyze the evolving perspectives of both interns and employers.

Interns

Although internships help interns develop job and career-related realistic skills and build relationships with industry professionals, alongwith strengthening their credibility and enhancing employability, still there is equally high likelihood of experiencing exploitation and unfair treatment doing menial tasks that add no value (Stewart *et al.*, 2021). Experiencing transactional relationships, dis-embeddedness and non-belongingness, interns feel reduced to temporary and expendable subjects despite contributing to the organization. Under pressure to prove their worth as a resource to the company, interns can often stay ambivalent regarding their own capability development needs at the cost of developing skills for companies that they think will improve their marketability and human capital. This highlights the need for interns to seek and prioritize capabilities development in place of short-term 'returns' including compensation and recognize that the overall experience of internship matters in creating a lasting influence on their overall learning and growth.

Employers

Market competition and the ever-evolving demands of the industry means that employers are searching ways to cut costs while finding talent with as little commitment as possible. It also means that there is a greater need to try new ideas and

find areas to invest in that are sustainable, evaluate existing programs and work on back-burner projects, support segments that are under-resourced, and identify potential recruits. Internship programs and interns meet these needs. However, most of the time, employers perceive interns' work and support as of low quality and find interns barely feeling a sense of responsibility despite getting disproportionately benefited from the internship. Consequently, employers reciprocate with little commitment. However, forced to keep offering such programs to stay relevant and attractive to the labour market while also avoiding threats of legal liability, employers use cost-cutting logic, frequently in relation to setting interns' compensation among others, to settle the equation.

Dignifying internship experiences

Given that interns and employers have little in common when it comes to needs-driven internships, here are three dimensions to elevate a capabilities-driven perspective in internships that will develop shared areas to potentially dignify the internships experience for interns and employers.

Equitable Treatment

Equitable treatment, from interns' point of view often revolves around the issue of compensation, whereas it is the quality of work and performance that matters for employers. Compensation serves as a measure of interns' worth and value of work. A low or inadequate compensation is an unprofessional attitude to neglect recognizing and valuing interns, creating conflicting dynamics for interns if they consider the internship valuable and a steppingstone to competitive industries. A rising contentious area is the issue of unpaid internships. Is it morally right to extract labour for free? Besides limiting the options for those who cannot afford to work without a wage, unpaid interns might have to compromise their dignity for the promise of a future employment. Moreover, token cash payments and seasonal internships that disproportionately give weightage to performance-related pay signal employers' discretion to extract more work through enticing incentive systems. A way for employers to acknowledge these factors is to design intern compensation systems with co-defined metrics, measurable and transparent systems, which in turn will potentially enable employers to gain focus on work-design and the quality of work desired from interns. Consequently, intern-employer relationships can become equitable on the lines of the value of equal pay for work. For employers', it is, however, crucial to remember that compensation may not solely help to achieve performance. Pay acts as an extrinsic motivator and should be the base to start identifying other areas of equitable treatment, which can be complemented with pay to design the overall structure of internships that help gain a pertinent rise in performance, thereby transitioning from short-term to strategic thinking (Maertz *et al.*, 2014).

Balanced Access

With the emergence of virtual and remote internships, the imbalance of access between interns' accessibility to internship opportunities compared to employers' access to the intern labour market has been reducing. However, with quality

internships concentrated in professional labour markets with interns coming from either top-tier educational institutions or highly skilled professionals who view internships as an extension of their freelancing careers, access barriers to internships have reduced only in the domain characterized by a high-density of low-skilled work. Imbalance regarding the quality of internships gained and offered highlights the need to provide capability to exercise choice. This means that organizations need to step up and design mobility channels to enable interns to progress from low-skills to high-skills work during and beyond their internships. Not only does this allow interns to exercise choice and grow organically and flexibly, it allows organizations to utilize interns' growing capabilities. Moreover, organizations in similar market segments, industries or regions can think of pooling intern opportunities, which not only adds access to opportunities as well as labour but also facilitates transition within organization and between organizations and roles, solving inequalities of access and dignifying interns' and employers' experiences through increased capability to exercise choice with relative freedom.

Regulative Governance

In addition to the lack of regulation in most labour-saturated economies, diverse regulations that fail to bring consistency in recognizing the unique requirements of internship as a work model and eliminate disparities and ethical shortcomings, indicate lack of regulatory governance. Resolving conflicts in the context of internships is an emerging need. Intern issues such as payment of compensation, award of certificates, treatment by managers and other employees, including harassment, multiple reporting, unreasonable deadlines, meaningless engagement; and employers' issues such as interns absenting or discontinuing the program without prior information, requires bringing in a third party to govern the intern-employer relationship. Regulation will also provide more clarity of choice before acceptance of internship and interns, and thereafter balancing the power asymmetries to respect the value of dignity for both interns and employers. Regulation should be sensitive to the unique challenges posed by the time-bound nature of internships besides evolving technologies and needs of interns and employers.

Implications for Lifelong Learning

Through the preceding discussion, we demonstrated that a renewed focus on equity, access and regulation can help dignify the experiences of interns and employers. Internships being crucial to LL implies that LL should be viewed as a willful use of opportunities and a manifestation of self-directed and negotiated value creation in a regulated environment, enhancing the sense of self through higher quality and increased contribution to the organization. While providing support for learner agency and ownership, LL is not reduced to just an economic investment that seeks to incentivize compliance. Rather helps achieve a capabilities-driven perspective that foregrounds shared dimensions of dignifying intern-employer relationships, facilitating the transition from human capital to human capabilities development in the evolving landscape of LL.

References

- P. Maertz Jr, C., Stoeberl, P. A. and Marks, J. (2014), “Building successful internships: lessons from the research for interns, schools, and employers”, *Career Development International*, Vol. 19 No. 1, pp.123-142.
- Poquet, O. and De Laat, M. (2021), “Developing capabilities: lifelong learning in the age of AI”, *British Journal of Educational Technology*, Vol. 52 No. 4, pp.1695-1708.
- Stewart, A., Owens, R., O'Higgins, N. and Hewitt, A. (Ed.s.) (2021), *Internships, employability and the search for decent work experience*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, UK.