

Reach for the stars! Realising the value of creative arts internships

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Abstract

There is an increasing emphasis on students to improve their own employability. Entering any workplace is competitive and to the student a complex and unknown environment. In recognition of this, there is an influx of ideas to support the transition to employment. In an attempt to demystify the workplace, students are encouraged to gain experience to help reach their potential and reach their career aspiration. This paper reflects on the Career Accelerated Internship Programme as an enrichment of the student experience. It provides an overview of creative arts internships and, in particular, the experiences of dance interns as they engage with LJMU cultural partners.

Keywords

internships; employability; enterprise; creative and performing arts; dance

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Reach for the stars!



Liverpool's status as European Capital of Culture in 2008 reaped many rewards for the city, particularly in terms of a civic pride and regeneration that has continued to flourish nearly ten years on. The rich seam of the arts is a major attraction for students opting to come to study in Liverpool. The Everyman and Playhouse, Liverpool Philharmonic Hall, The Walker Art Gallery, Tate Liverpool are iconic places, but the city has also boasted many high-profile events ranging from electrifying music at Sound City and Liverpool Music Week, to prestigious arts events, such as the Biennial of Contemporary Art. In addition, each year LightNight has drawn visitors to venues large and small, old and new to celebrate a wide array of arts and culture on offer in Merseyside, whilst other specially tailored festivals, such as DaDaFest and Homotopia, supported by the Arts Council England, have come to represent some of the best arts practice in the world. As demonstrated by LJMU's Student Opportunities Team, getting students engaged in the rich and diverse tapestry of the arts in Liverpool is, therefore, both an exciting and important proposition.

Providing the opportunities for students to engage purposefully in the region is also championed by the LJMU Careers Team. Via its Career Accelerator Internship Programme, LJMU supports second year and graduate interns, to gain realistic graduate level work experience, by funding 20 day internships with host organisations.

This is normally done as a single block, or can be spaced out over the academic year. In short, the Career Accelerator Programme provides a deeper understanding of what employers require, enabling the University to connect employers to the right student or graduate. The interns are paid a living wage by LJMU for the duration of the internship; the overall aim is to provide interns experiences that would better prepare them for graduate level work.

This year, one of the host organisations was the Merseyside Dance Initiative (MDI) (www.mdi.org.uk), a body that promotes dance as a means to mental and physical wellbeing, locating its projects and workshops in communities across the region. MDI offered LJMU interns an opportunity to engage with the Leap Dance Festival 2017 (between 1-25 March) and, in particular, the chance to engage in a range of job roles that would promote the Festival via a series of pop-up performances in the city. Leap 2017 represented the 25th anniversary of the event and presented work by companies based locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. It involved animating parts of the city, particularly the central and commercial districts, and performing in shopping centres, train stations as well as other iconic spaces.

These moments represent an opportunity for students to be acknowledged for their artistic qualities and temperament, and to showcase other talents, such as an ability to work in a team, co-deliver and create a project, and develop many personal skills that would allow them to flourish upon graduation. Interns selected to work with the Leap Festival, therefore, performed or engaged in other duties (for instance, one intern created a blog, and another curated materials, such as photographs and video footage). Reflecting on the performance of one of the 'dance interns', a dance artist at the MDI observed, "The intern was able to

demonstrate perfect and flawless technique, the material was beautifully choreographed and allowed for fluidity; the movement showed a creative use of dynamics and focus, giving the audience a stunning performance.”

This appreciation was, in part, also acknowledgement of the interns’ rapid personal development, ability to work collectively, under pressure and, sometimes, in trying situations. For instance, reflecting on their experience within the MDI, one of the dance interns, noted needing to “adapt last minute and working to suit [the] space” whilst delivering the performances at several different locations. Overall, this had afforded an opportunity “to grow as a performer, [whilst] offering new ways of working within the creative context.” Another Dance Practices student commented on how the experience had enabled them “to perform in new spaces, and to experience new artistic ideas from a professional artist in the industry” and concluded, “I am discovering what it is to work as a professional, it’s fast! Rehearse, perform, rehearse, new performance space, rehearse!”

Students undertaking other internships reported similar experiences. One Level 5 Fine Art student reflected on the benefits of working in a gallery space and the professional culture in that environment:

I have learnt about the different job roles within the gallery, along with how each individual contributes to the functioning of the institution as a whole. Working at the gallery has introduced me to aspects of the industry I have not before experienced; this is invaluable to me as a developing artist. Working at the gallery is great exposure and has sparked new interests for me, I have started to understand what I enjoy and don't enjoy when working within a gallery environment, along with my strong and weaker aspects.

These observations were supported by a Fine Art graduate who felt that they had “learnt a great deal about the processes and how the staff operate.”

In a recent reflection on the civic university, Goddard et al. (2017) reflect on new institutional models that have evolved in response to a myriad of drivers, including some very searching societal and labour market requirements. The Internship Programme is a means by which LJMU connects with, as Goodard (2009) observes on the ‘engaged civic university’, its partners in a way in which the University can participate fully in the region of which it forms part. In another recent critique of higher education, Robert Troschitz (2017), in a ‘historical discourse’ of the student, underlined the following ‘dominant ideas’ that have shaped post-war debate in England (p. 196):

- The economic idea of higher education, where HE is framed within a discourse structured by nodal points such as ‘economy’, ‘prosperity’, or ‘employability’. The main purpose of HE is seen as supplying the economy with workers and/or in improving the career prospects of the individual.
- The ‘liberal’ idea of higher education that is organised around concepts like ‘truth’, ‘learning’, ‘tradition’, ‘criticality’, ‘culture’, and ‘moral growth’ and, therefore, incorporates the mental and personal development of the individual.
- The social idea of higher education with nodal points such as ‘equality’, ‘justice’, and ‘the people’. Here, the emphasis is on the benefits of HE to society, the role of education in social reproduction, and on education as a means for social change.

The Internship Programme cross-cuts each of these conceptualisations of HE, and its outcomes bear similarities with other studies

of industry-based internships in the creative and performing arts (*cf.* Daniel and Daniel, 2013). However, its context and significance is best underlined by the general graduate opportunities afforded to those in the creative arts upon leaving university. As reported by Prospects and AGCAS [Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services] (2016), self-employment and freelancing is much more common among graduates in the arts and creative industries when compared with other sectors; the Internship Programme develops some key enterprising skills.

From the 2016/17 programme, a significant proportion of the participants secured employment with the host organisation they had worked with, for instance:

The intern's main role was Social Media Manager, which includes using our Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts to highlight our work and network with clients. However, he has been excited about helping the organisation to get the best out of its accounts and he will continue as our Finance Manager particularly as this relates directly to his degree. He has been excellent in taking over the Finances of the project and drilling down into the detail and liaising with all concerned including management and technical accounts.

Whilst students' skills and knowledge have been on display, it has been the personal attributes and values that have elicited praise and acknowledgement by the host organisation:

Student A has been present every day, he is hard working and diligent and has been a brilliant addition to the ... team. He has fit in extremely well with the rest of the team and a pleasure to have on site. As a result he has been offered [a chance] to continue to gain more experience.

It has been rewarding to watch many of the interns flourish in a relatively short period of time. They have been committed, persistent and relished the opportunity to develop and grow. Their contributions have enabled LJMU to forge successful partnerships with local enterprises and organisations, and further establish it as a modern civic university.

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References

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