

# Criteria for academic internships

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## Introduction

For a number of years, the role of internships has been a subject of discussion when reviewing the Education and Examination Regulations. The introduction of the term 'academic internship' and the idea of making the grading of all internships compulsory has led to opposition from various organizations within Wageningen University.

The system of internships is valued by students as an opportunity to spend some time outside the WU and experience a different environment, to learn to live in another culture and to gain work experience. Students are able to gain experience that can prove invaluable and MSc programmes view internships as an important factor in the development of students. Several groups have expressed concern that the diversity of the internships will not be taken into account sufficiently, that the interests of the internship providers will be reduced, that valuable opportunities for internships will disappear, and that internships will be restricted to university (laboratory) projects.

In a skills-oriented MSc programme, an internship is considered a unique opportunity to strengthen professional skills and, particularly, the attitude of the students. In that respect, the internship is a valuable complement to course subjects in programmes.

## Why an evaluated, academic internship?

The internship can represent up to a quarter of a master programme. For such an important part of the programme, quality must be guaranteed. To ensure this quality, the institutions and the students must know which standards the internship must meet. Equally, the criteria for the evaluation of the student must be laid down, as well as the results of that evaluation. This evaluation is necessary in order to determine whether the student has met the required minimum level deemed necessary to be considered for a diploma.

An internship adds to the characteristics of the study programme of the student. He/she will enter the world outside the university and is expected to make a conscious choice for a certain theme and location. For such a component, it is important that the lecturer in a chair group and the study advisor provide the student with sufficient advice and help the student to derive as much benefit as possible from the internship, taking into account the aspect of his/her studies that he/she wants to focus on. During the internship, the development of the student's skills takes clear priority, and they will receive feedback and learn about their own strong and weak points.

The term 'academic' shows in general terms that the level of the internship is appropriate to the scientific character of an MSc. The grade awarded shows clearly how the student performed during the internship.

The student knows that the internship is an integral part of the study programme and will count towards the final level, and therefore that his/her performance during the internship is important. The content and activities of the internship will take priority over having a good time. The grade enables the student to show clearly that he/she has been able to perform well in an organization outside the university. In addition, the grade, the justification of the grade and the whole process of evaluation all provide the student with a means to reflect on his/her performance and, in a few cases, to appeal against the evaluation made.

For the internship provider, an evaluated, academic internship means that the provider should be informed what is expected of the student, and so from the provider, too. It makes it clear what role the internship plays in the course and what value the university attaches to it.

With an evaluated, academic internship, future employers gain direct information about the attributes of the candidate, how he performed in an unknown professional environment.

The programme directors and study advisors gain information about the performance of the student during a significant period of the study programme. Guidance can be given when necessary. The assessment of the provider gives also valuable information on how the programme is linked up with future employment.

An evaluated, academic internship compels the chair group and the lecturer to prepare and supervise the internship adequately and reflect on their evaluation.

The internship can be a compulsory part of an MSc or part of a restricted choice thesis/internship. The programme committee determines, with the consent of the Board of the Educational Institute, whether an internship forms part of the study programme and what options an MSc student has.

Some of the students who take part in the MSc programme come from HBO programmes, or from abroad. Some have been involved in education for a long period, or can point to ample relevant work experience in their past. Study advisors and examining boards receive many requests for exemptions concerning internships from such students – in order to shorten the length of the study programme or to make room for another course that the student would like to follow for his/her future career, for example. Defining learning outcomes and weight of these outcomes gives examining boards tools to validate acquired competences elsewhere. For programmes where the students can make choices, the aims of the research thesis and the internship must be made clear, as well as the differences between the two in view of the programme and the specific requirements that the a thesis or internship must meet.

## **Criteria**

The purpose of the following section is to propose a formulation of the criteria for an academic internship. Much of it is based on work carried out by Jan Willem Hofstee and Theo Lexmond.

The criteria for an academic internship and their organization are to be laid down by the Board of the Educational Institute. The precise manner of assessment of the internship and evaluation of examination is the responsibility of the examining boards. When the evaluation of internships is introduced, the examining boards are to determine how an internship will be weighted when a *cum laude* is awarded.

For the purposes of this document, it will be assumed that the general criteria will be applied to all study programmes and all students. It will also be the case that students and supervisors may come up against unexpected and unforeseeable situations, for which sensible and prudent solutions must be found. It is therefore advisable that a general code of practice should not go into the details of every aspect. Study programmes can, if so desired, introduce further rules for particular groups of students with the consent of the Board of the Educational Institute. These rules may relate to the length, the location, the supervisory chair group(s), and so on. Additionally, it is acknowledged that each chair group has its own culture and rules, such as requirements for oral presentations and reports delivered. The Educational Institute or the relevant examining board will, in consultation with the examiner and the study advisor, have the final say in making exceptions to the rules laid down when these rules conflict substantially with the interests of an individual student.

It is proposed that the criteria for evaluated, academic internships are applied to all internships which have not yet begun and for which no contract has been drawn up at the time of the entry into force of the new Education and Examination Regulations (OER).

The criteria for an academic internship can be subdivided into:

1. Learning objectives and activities
2. Internship provider
3. Supervision
4. Reporting and assessment
5. Student
6. Study programme

#### *1. Learning Objectives and activities*

The general learning objectives are:

- The application of knowledge and skills acquired during the course of study;
- The acquisition of relevant knowledge, insight and skills through work experience;
- Working independently and with a feeling of responsibility with an organisation.

The student formulates his/her own personal learning objectives. These objectives will be checked against the competency document of the relevant study programme in consultation with the study advisor and/or internship coordinator. The objectives will then be set out in the internship contract.

The fields in which the student will work during the internship must be set out in advance in an internship contract, and require approval from both the internship provider and the responsible WU chair group. The work must be carried out at an academic level; that is to say that reflecting on the practices of the internship provider and on the student's own functions are important, and that analysis, problem-solving, and the preparation and justification of a work plan all form an integral part of the internship activities. Time must also be reserved for progress discussions, reporting and a final evaluation.

#### *2. Internship provider*

The nature of the work requires supervision by academically trained employees from the organisation. The supervisor must have knowledge of the requirements that an academic internship must meet, and have sufficient knowledge and experience in the subject to be able to support and evaluate the student.

The location of the internship must reflect the possible first working environment of a recently graduated student from the student's course of study. The internship gives the student the opportunity to reflect on his/her strong and weak points. The internship provider must be an organisation which is familiar with the field in question, and can guarantee that the student will participate in discussions at MSc level. It must be clear to the internship provider that the student's learning process is an important aspect of the internship and that productivity and results may be of lesser importance than this. The internship provider may be an academic institution, but may equally be a governmental institution, an NGO or a business.

#### *3. Supervision*

The supervisor responsible within the internship provider must be known and accepted in advance by the chair group responsible. The WU chair group has final responsibility and must ensure that the student receives sufficient support from the chair group's internship supervisor. The student must have an opportunity to work at an appropriate level and be evaluated accordingly.

#### *4. Reporting and assessment*

On the conclusion of the internship activities, a report must be composed which meets scientific criteria for quality: a description of the analysis of a problem or a situation and literature used for the analysis, a justification of the methods and approaches used or a description of provider's routines, results and discussion.

In all cases, it must be possible to evaluate the activities and the report of the student.

The student is evaluated on a set of criteria concerning his/her functioning during the internship and on the quality of the report. All parties must be aware of the fact that the internship provider may apply different criteria and give priority to different areas than the chair group.

The method of reporting may conflict with the interests of the internship provider. The internship provider may, in advance or on the basis of the results obtained, demand a certain degree of confidentiality. This needs to be agreed beforehand. In all cases, the internship supervisor of the chair group must have been able to examine a report in order to be able to evaluate whether the work carried out and the methods of reporting have met the standards of teaching in the subject area, and make an overall evaluation. If necessary, a report can be made anonymous for the purposes of evaluation; that is to say, sensitive information may be presented in an encrypted format. Anyhow, the activities and performance of the student must be well documented to be suitable for presentation to external reviewers as part of an accreditation process. Situations beyond the control of the parties involved must be taken into account during the evaluation. The chair group remains responsible for education and a satisfactory conclusion.

An evaluation and feedback can only take place when detailed agreements have been laid down between the student, the internship provider and the chair group concerning the nature and scope of the working activities, supervision, the report that must be submitted and the evaluation criteria. The implication of this is, therefore, that an internship contract must be drawn up before each internship begins.

#### *5. Student*

The student also has responsibilities concerning the progress of the internship. Should the student become aware that problems may arise, he/she is responsible for informing the WU supervisor of such problems in good time. If problems only come to light after the internship, any negative impact on the evaluation possibly cannot then be corrected. The student must ensure that he/she has researched all factors which could affect the smooth progress of the internship and that he/she is aware of all the requirements and expectations of the internship provider and the relevant chair group.

#### *6. Study programme*

The theme and location of the internship must be relevant to the study programme and the specialisation.

The courses taken by an MSc student must form a coherent whole. If the internship has a different orientation to the main orientation of the student's MSc programme – a  $\gamma$ -oriented internship with a  $\beta$ -study programme, for example – then sufficient preparatory courses must have been taken to guarantee that the student can gain the most from the internship period, and can also fulfil his/her role as a WU ambassador. To ensure that the student has the opportunity to prepare sufficiently for the internship both in terms of its content and in terms of organisation (travel arrangements, housing, language courses, visa and so on), it is desirable that the internship should be planned for the second half of the MSc programme and that the student first be required to complete the prescribed courses.

To describe the academic character of an internship, the internship is sometimes referred to as 'a second thesis project on location'. Many WU master programmes wish an internship which clearly diverges from that of completing a (research) thesis project at a chair group. Additionally, the student may deliberately choose to become familiar with an academic circle outside an academic institute and report this on his/her CV.

It is therefore advisable that the concept of the internship remains separate from that of the thesis project, both in terms of learning outcomes and places where an internship can be taken.

## Education and Examination Regulations

### Internship

1. Prior to the internship, an internship contract is to be drawn up. This is to lay down, as a minimum, the internship provider and the supervisor responsible, the chair group and the lecturer responsible, the field of work, the scope and duration of the internship, the method of reporting and assessment and, where applicable, particular arrangements concerning how the internship is to be carried out and reported.
2. The internship will be conducted within a field, and in a place of work, where work is conducted at an academic level. The internship activities will be carried out in a manner which is customary within a scientific environment in the field of work concerned. The supervisor with primary responsibility is to be active at an academic level.
3. The internship will be evaluated by the examiner in the subject (partly on the basis of information provided by the internship provider) and according to a protocol laid down by the examining board.
4. The evaluated, academic internship will be introduced for all MSc internships for which a contract is drawn up after September 2008.

### *Cum laude*

1. The average of all subjects in the MSc programme, with the exception of thesis projects and internships, is at least an 8.
2. The thesis project within the main focus of the programme and the specialisation has been evaluated with at least a 9.
3. The second thesis project or compulsory internship has been evaluated with at least 8.
4. Further thesis projects or internships have been evaluated with at least 8.

### **An assessment protocol**

For the purposes of evaluating theses, a standard protocol has been developed. In order to attain uniformity in the evaluation and recording of internships, an assessment form must also be designed. It is argued that it would be preferable to use a comparable structure for both forms, because:

1. The internship is of an academic nature and must therefore to a large extent be assessed according to the same standards as a thesis project.
2. It is more useful for chair groups and lecturers to begin from a standard point of departure. Evaluation criteria acquire a meaning and lecturers come to know what is meant.
3. When external reviews take place, the status of an internship as equal to a thesis project is clearer.

The assessment protocol will need to be tested over time. It is conceivable that, over time, subject-specific or area-specific modifications will need to be made.

The form is based on the assumption that the chair group will have the final responsibility for collecting information from the internship provider and the completed assessment forms. The chair group, and not the internship provider, should be approached by the student in the case of disagreements concerning the evaluation or for appeals.

## **Explanatory note to the document Academic Internship**

15-4-2008 Harry Scholten

Programme committees (13), examining boards, the OWI Board, and the E&R committee of the COR and SSC have commented on the first draft of the document 'Criteria academische stage' of 27-9-2007.

The reactions give valuable suggestions for general improvement of the text. More importantly, the reactions give clear indications where texts can be read different ways. They also show that programme committees see different positions for an internship in the programme and that learning outcomes and evaluation might need some additional thoughts.

The most important comments and objections have been summarized and will be discussed.

### *Role of chair group*

Some committees fear the amount of work for chair groups to comply with all rules and documents. Quality assurance is the most important reason to move to evaluated, academic internships. The present system concentrates responsibility for education and educational quality with the chair groups. Therefore, the proposed procedures give the chair group a central role. It should be made clear that responsibility in this respect means responsibility for the educational content and evaluation and not for the behavior of the student. Recently the compensation for chair groups has been increased from 10 to 20 hours per internship (16 hrs supervision and 4 hrs evaluation and examining). The proposed procedure assumes that the student will be responsible for contacts and agreements with an internship provider and will deliver a major part of the information for the internship agreement and documents for evaluation.

### *Internship agreement*

Many committees expect problems or see drawbacks of strict rules and tight contracts. Fulfillment of all rules may frighten interesting internship providers. Some providers won't like to fix agreements on activities many months in advance and for internships abroad it can be a fiction to expect that everything will turn out like anticipated before. Nevertheless, there are a number of reasons to stick to the agreement:

- In terms of quality assurance no university can accept that a student is sent for almost half a year without control of activities and level beforehand. Procedures to maintain minimal standards will have to be presented for accreditations.
- The student has to be trained to organize a stay outside the university and to take all necessary steps to find agreement with a provider on subject, time, supervision etc. The student himself has to check all aspects even in case of a well known organization next door. The student also needs to assure that all parties have the same ideas and expectations of the internship, that his learning aims are clear to the provider. The only way to supervise the student in this respect by a chair group is asking for relevant documentation.
- Important aspects like supervision, availability of facilities etc. have always to be guaranteed. When these conditions are not met it can be doubted whether an internship should be considered.
- The chair groups can read from the agreement that in principle the provider is aware of the learning outcomes for the student and that all ingredients are available for a successful stay. It should be clear to the provider that the student is not just cheap labor for any job coming up.
- Society will hold the university and people responsible when serious problems abroad are occurring and basic precautions to protect the student haven't been observed. Student shouldn't be sent to high risks areas in case of serious environmental

problems (e.g. drought, flooding) or politically unstable situations, exposed to extremely stressful conditions, or to places where regular contact is impossible. Students may enjoy a steep learning curve in unknown situations, but they are still in a learning situation and shouldn't be regarded as experienced workers knowing how to react appropriately.

In general, the lecturer of a chair group will know what issues have to be addressed in the agreement and where special attention is needed.

The agreement will never guarantee a success story, but should at least promote a good start and assure a positive lifetime experience for the student.

#### *Scheduling the internship*

It is proposed to schedule the internship in the second year of a master. A few programme committees feel that an internship at the start of a master can provide the student a reference for a professional situation. This might help the student to develop his personal master programme and choosing the appropriate courses and thesis subject. This can be a valid argument, but preparation for an internship, taking additional courses or learning an additional language will take at least several months. Moreover, the student may need a considerable time to explore the possibilities and to find out what direction he wants to go, what his learning goals are. Some kind of self assessment can be inevitable. Students in a bachelor in Wageningen may have an early start preparing an internship for a subsequent master, but strictly speaking an internship starting in September of the first year is not feasible for incoming students. Therefore, an internship shouldn't be scheduled in the Study Handbook in the first period of M1.

Seasons and climate conditions may be dominant factors for many internships dealing with outdoor situations or living organisms. In general, interesting projects with companies and organizations can not always start at a moment that is convenient of student and programme.

An internship at the end of a master after an intensive training in a thesis project can be a big first step on a career ladder. In addition, the student doing an internship at the end of the master can test his ability to perform in a position and decide whether the planned route is right.

When quality assurance is becoming a factor of importance for internships the chair groups are likely to ask the students to be well prepared. It is not proposed here to allow chair groups to publish prerequisites for internships. Some programmes are already overcrowded and it can't be predicted at this moment what it could mean for the present set of advanced courses. Nevertheless it is obvious that student, study advisor and chair group should take the type of internship into account when planning a master programme. This means that programmes should advise students to start organizing their internship at the start of a master. Students should realize that last minute opportunities for interesting internships can't always be granted anymore because of lack of time for necessary preparation.

In conclusion, a student can plan an internship depending on external conditions (climate, season, vacancies) somewhere from the second part of M1 till the end of M2.

#### *Learning outcomes and report*

The learning outcomes differ for the programmes. Therefore no detailed descriptions have been given. It should be stressed that programmes should inform students about the learning outcomes the programme has established. The chair groups should be very clear to the student what learning outcomes are evaluated. The student should know in advance what the objectives are, what he is supposed to do, and how to do this, how to report on it and how to get feedback from the supervisor.

It is proposed that chair groups publish the learning outcomes of their internships, the way it is evaluated, specific regulations, oral presentations etc. either in the Study Handbook or on a website. It is also conceivable that programmes inform students about their requirements for internships, but it may be difficult for chair groups to handle different sets of outcomes when serving different programmes. Therefore, it is advised that the chair groups describe their system and programmes check whether the described outcomes are in line with their policy.

Students of some programmes use to do an internship at a research institution outside WU with all characteristics of 'a second thesis outside WU'. The internship as described in this document should have different goals from such 'second thesis'. The present educational framework facilitates programmes to choose between an internship or a second thesis next to the main thesis. When programmes want to choose for one of both or give students the option to choose themselves, they should clearly distinguish between outcomes referring to a research project or to a project focused on work experience.

Several reactions of programme committee emphasize the reflection on practices of the internship provider and self-reflection of the student. For some staying in a different environment, a different culture, and getting insight in professional skills and the functioning of an organization are major goals of an internship. In fact, the self reflection as component of an internship was thought to be so obvious that it wasn't described in detail in the first drafts of the proposal.

The proposal assumes that skills and content (type and subject) are equally important. Only by active participation in a project (research, design, proposal, marketing strategy etc) and being (partly) responsible for activities in such a project the student can reflect on his functioning in a professional environment. The active participation forces the student to analyze a situation, to find out what are the questions or goals, what are the options and restrictions and to see how an organization deals with it. Having participated in any activity should enable a student to account for his work in a report.

Several committees seem to associate the word 'report' with a  $\beta$ -research project in an university laboratory. It should be stressed that in the proposal the word report is used for any written presentation and defense of a student on any study activity, a chemical laboratory experiment being just one of many possibilities.

Working on a project and reflection on functioning and skills means that local supervision should be at academic level. This supervisor should be able to understand the learning outcomes of the student and the way this limits the role of student as employee and should be a source of information to discuss options and preferred solutions. Programme committees object to the obligation to involve academics as local supervisors. Of course a supervisor can work at an academic level without being graduated, but the title itself guarantees that he may understand the student. Supervision by an academic doesn't necessarily mean that he is always on the spot. The student should be able to contact him when necessary.

Some programmes ask for a separate report for the self reflection. The proposal didn't work out this idea because the situation may dictate the best option. A provider could want the student to deliver a report without personal statements. Some programmes or chair groups may highly recommend a report in form of a scientific publication in a refereed journal. In such cases the reflection could also be delivered in a second report. It is up to programme, chair group, and student to find the best solution. Again, it should be clear to the student beforehand what is expected.



### *Evaluation*

The present system of WU gives chair groups the responsibility for evaluation of students. All examiners are teachers of WU. Therefore, internship providers can't play a formal role in assessment of the internship and the signature of the provider on any document has no status in the student evaluation. Consequently the University can't send official evaluation forms to providers. In addition, the provider will in general look at other criteria than the learning outcomes of a programme. Probably he will appreciate final results more than personal development and self reflection of the student. Chair group will of course have contact with the provider and will translate judgment of the provider into information for the internship evaluation.

Several programme committees have a problem with the grading of an internship. Especially for internships abroad it is difficult to assess whether the student has met the criteria of the chair group and programme. It is indicated several times that progress in activities of a student abroad is not always under control of the chair group and that projects can seriously fail.

The proposal follows the idea that a successful project presented in a report shows that the student has done a decent job. But also that the product itself is no definite proof of good performance of the student. Possibly the student could have done even better. On the other hand, a failing project doesn't exclude that the student explored all his possibilities, made the right choices, was resourceful etc. In other words, a failing project still can result in a high mark. It is to the chair group supervisor to weigh carefully all information including that of the provider.

A testimonium for an internship indicates only that a student spend some time in a different environment and can write a report on it. In the current system it is quite possible that a student doesn't perform satisfactory, but does receive a testimonium. The testimonium also doesn't invite supervisors to have a good look into the documentation. The testimonium also excludes an ambitious student from being graded with a high mark when being successful and showing it to future employers.

It is conceivable that a student ends up with a completely failing internship without any blame whatsoever from his side. Local conditions abroad are not under control, a provider can refuse to release a report, or the requests of a provider to a student are not in line with the goals or agreement. The students should have notified the supervisor from the chair group about problems and disputes as soon as possible. In those cases a testimonium could be a practical escape to award the credits to the student. However, awarding a testimonium should to be decided by an examining board and decisions should be well documented and filed. This in view of future accreditations.

### *Assessment form*

A number of suggestions have been received to revise the proposed assessment form. When the learning outcomes are evaluated the form should refer to those learning outcomes. From the suggestions it appears that programme committees have different opinions on the major learning outcomes to be covered in an assessment form. The proposal is based on the assumption that a limited number of criteria should cover any internship. A solution could be to add one or two blank boxes to be completed by the chair group in order to allow teachers and chair group some flexibility. It should however be known by the student before starting an internship that the chair group or programme wants to evaluate some specific criterions. In general however, the learning outcomes as determined by university and programme can overrule the preferences of chair group or supervisor.

An assessment form should be informative for external reviewers and should clearly state the aspects evaluated and the process of grading.

### *Exemptions*

Once the learning outcomes of the internship have been described and published request for exemptions from incoming students should be considered in view of these outcomes.

Working experience or an internship as part of a study abroad as such without well documented self reflection etc. shouldn't be accepted anymore.