

# **Teacher externships as a practice of inter-organizational collaboration between institutions of higher education and public and private organizations**

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## **Abstract**

The present paper takes a practice theoretical approach (Rouse, 2006) to investigating the extent to which the phenomenon of teacher externships can be used as an initiative for creating long-lasting and strong collaborations between institutions of higher education and public and private organizations in Denmark. Previous experience suggests that externships do in fact provide the opportunity for establishing strong ties between industry personnel and educators (Bennet et al, 1998; Stephens, 2011; Blassingame, 1999; Luft and Vidoni, 2000). Based on existing studies, and mindful of the pressure on Danish universities to 'turn to practice', we ask how externships may contribute to the inter-organizational collaboration between institutions of higher education and public and private organizations. Based on a qualitative analysis of an externship program in which a total of 25 lecturers at institutions of higher education within the region of Zealand, Denmark entered into collaborations with 35 public and private organizations, we present two preliminary conclusions: existing networks are strengthened and broadened through externships, and teachers feel enlightened by the experience and are inspired to add new elements to or otherwise change their teaching. Thus, externships may pave the way for future collaborations and may bring 'practice' into the classroom.

## Introduction

Over the past decade, higher education – especially at university level – has been subject to much debate. Specifically, the validation of institutions of higher education in regards to the employability skills of the graduates has been put into question (Bologna Declaration, 1999; London Communiqué, 2007; Bologna Conference, 2009). As a consequence, enhancing these skills is one of five key priorities in the EU's growth strategy for the coming decade – Europe 2020 (Europe 2020, n.d.). In Denmark, the discussion between academia, industry, media and politicians regarding the telos of higher education and how this relates to graduates' employability has, among other things, led to the realization of a parallel system in which higher education is now offered in both traditional (academic) universities and at more vocationally oriented institutions (Campbell and Rozsnyai, 2002).

Furthermore, all Danish institutions of higher education now to a greater extent have to justify their existence through arguments based on their relevance to the surrounding society; the institutions must demonstrate that they are able to deliver graduates who are of value to public and private organizations (Plougmann, 2012; Videnskabsministeriet, 2005). This development is not confined to the Danish case, but here it is particularly strongly linked to a discourse of 'practical competencies'; it is to a high degree assumed that employers – and not the institutions of higher education – know which skills the students will need in 'real life' and, hence, must have acquired upon graduation. The discourse of the 'expertise of practitioners' as well as the broader debate about the value of higher education has led to an increased interest in building and investigating inter-organizational collaborations between Danish institutions of higher education and the professional life for which these institutions train their graduates.

With an outset in this socio-political context, the present paper takes a practice theoretical (as opposed to the popular discourse on 'practical competencies'; more on this later) approach (Rouse, 2006) to investigating the extent to which the phenomenon of teacher externships can be used as an initiative for creating long-lasting and strong collaborations between institutions of higher education and public and private organizations in Denmark. Previous experience suggests that externships do in fact provide the opportunity for establishing strong ties between industry personnel and educators (Bennet et al, 1998; Stephens, 2011; Blassingame, 1999; Luft and Vidoni, 2000). According to Bennet et al (1998)

"...externships provide a dialogue between personnel and educators that aids in establishing permanent links between the workplace and the classroom" (p. 4).

Based on the existing studies<sup>1</sup>, and mindful of the pressure on Danish institutes of higher education to 'turn to practice' we ask:

*How may externships contribute to the inter-organizational collaboration between institutions of higher education and public and private organizations?*

## Presentation of the study

The present paper provides a qualitative analysis of an externship program, in which a total of 25 lecturers at institutions of higher education within the region of Zealand, Denmark entered into collaborations with 35 public and private organizations. In order to gain a broad base for assessing the possible benefits of externships, educators from two universities, one university college and one business academy were invited to participate in the externship program. Of the invited institutions, three ended up participating; Roskilde University, University College Zealand and Zealand Institute of Business and Technology.

The 25 participating lecturers represent a wide variety of disciplines, such as History, Marketing & Communication, Web Development, Multimedia Design, Computer Science, Laboratory Studies, Nutrition & Health Studies, Financial Studies and Agricultural Studies. And the participating companies and organizations are of an equal variety.

Despite the diversity in disciplines among the participants in the externship program, the lecturers' reasoning for attending was fairly unanimous; first and foremost, they wanted to use the externship to increase their understanding of the business world in order to create more engaging and relevant educational experiences for their students and, more generally, they wanted to improve their knowledge about the business life for which they train the students.

## Methodology

The present paper is an exploratory investigation of the extent to which teacher externships can be seen as drivers of inter-organizational collaborations between institutions of higher education and public and private organizations. In preparation of the first actual externships, and so as to set up a framework for how to conduct them,

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<sup>1</sup> Most existing studies have been carried out in the United States with a focus on career tech and high school teachers (Reese, 2005; Anderson, 1999; Luft and Vidoni, 2000). Thus, a secondary aim of this paper is to investigate whether the positive findings also hold true for a Danish and, by extension, Northern European context and within the area of higher education.

an extensive desk research into the topic of teacher externships was made and a field trip to organizations in the US that have been carrying out externships for a number of years was undertaken. Overall, results from previous studies show that externships can aid in creating more practice- and problem-oriented lectures (Bennet et al, 1998; Stephens, 2011; Blassingame, 1999), and that this in turn creates more engaged students who are better able to understand how the lectures relate to future careers. As already indicated, in this particular study, we did not only seek to draw on and complement existing practical experiences and research, but also to provide new insight into the extent to which teacher externships result in collaboration and mutual learning.

Thus, the initial research indicated that a modification of the primarily US-based and high school-oriented model of externships might be needed when conducting externships in a Danish higher education context. Whereas most externships in the US are quite formalized collaborations with one organization that invites in a number of high school teachers and provides them with a 'package deal', the present project sees externships as more open, individualized and dynamic processes of mutual learning between the participating lecturers and host organizations. All lecturers attending the program had to spend time on their teacher externship equivalent to 40 working hours, but it was up to them to decide if they wanted to focus their time on one or more companies, just as they - in collaboration with the host organization(s) - could decide to do the externship in one concentrated timespan or spread it out over the course of a full semester. For practical purposes, the 25 lecturers were divided into two teams; team 1 consisting of 9 lecturers who undertook their externships during the fall semester of 2013 and team 2 consisting of 16 lecturers who undertook their externships during the spring semester of 2014.

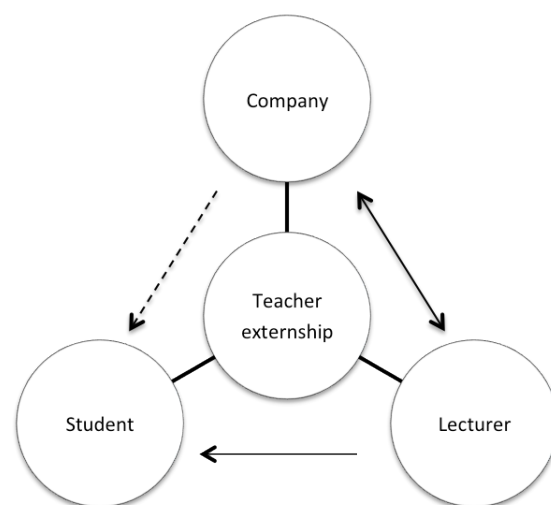
Given the exploratory and practice-oriented nature of this study, we prioritized the use of qualitative rather than quantitative data, as it was expected that this type of data would be able to provide the best understanding of whether and how teacher externships could contribute to the development of deeper, better and stronger inter-organizational collaborations. The empirical data can be divided into three phases: before, during and after the externship. Before the externship, lecturers and business representatives entered a training agreement containing a list of tasks to be undertaken during the externship. During the externship, the lecturers wrote journals in which they reflected upon the experiences gained during the externship and how these might affect their professional development and future teaching and/or supervision practices. After the externship, a questionnaire was sent to lecturers and business representatives. Selected lecturers and business representatives have furthermore been asked to participate in a semi-structured in-depth interviews.

As mentioned, the present paper forms part of a larger project that may be characterized as action-based research (Reason and Bradbury, 2008); the over-all aim of the project being to suggest how teacher externships might best be carried out, based on the experiences gained and analyses undertaken as the project unfolded. In

the current paper, we are particularly interested in the effects of various forms of externships, e.g. stays at one or more companies and during one or more time periods. The results of our analyses as well as the feedback of participating lecturers and organizations from the first round of externships were brought to bear on subsequent externships, and the results of these were then, in turn, evaluated and used to inform future practices. Thus, in the project we have constantly been monitoring the project in all of its stages, and have therefore been able to use the on-going evaluations and experiences to make adjustments as the project developed.

In an effort to enhance the reliability of the study, a triangulation of data has been applied to the object of investigation - i.e. teacher externships as a phenomenon. The triangulation used in this case was done within-method, by giving different perspectives on the teacher externships (see figure 1), as opposed to triangulation of data between methods with different ideologies (Holloway et al, 2010, p. 78). The present paper represents initial findings and only builds on the experiences of organizations and lecturers, identifying main patterns that relate directly to the theme of inter-organizational collaboration.

Figure 1: In-method triangulation of data



As indicated above, we view the externships through a practice theoretical lens, thereby seeking to inform and modify the currently dominant popular discourse on 'practical competencies' as belonging to the domain of professional organizations. Rather than succumbing to this discourse, which stipulates that it is practitioners rather than institutions of higher education who should set a standard for the educational outcomes of graduates, we offer a theoretically informed understanding of practice as a means of re-balancing the relationship between 'academics' and 'practitioners'. That is, we argue that for any inter-organizational cooperation between academia and industry to take place, it is essential that both sides engage actively in the collaboration. Externships, we claim, are not (only) about learning from practice and bringing practical experience back into the classroom; they may (also) do this, but only if all involved parties engage in mutual or 'double-loop' learning (Argyris, 2004). Through such mutual learning both sides of the cooperation can increase access to human capacity and, over time, establish valuable and sustainable relationships for their mutual benefit. We seek to substantiate this claim through the investigation of the extent to which actual teacher externships result in collaboration and mutual learning.

## Findings

By the end of the project, 29 out of 35 company representatives answered a questionnaire and five interviews were made. Furthermore, 21 out of 25 lecturers replied to their questionnaire, followed by five in-depth interviews and two focus-group interviews.

In the questionnaires directed at the lecturers, 20 out of 21 agree that the externship has given them a deeper insight into the industry within which the companies operate, and agree that the externship has increased their own professional experience and understanding. All lecturers unanimously state that they are either satisfied or very satisfied with the externship. These results were further substantiated during the focus group interview and in the lecturers' journals, exemplified by one lecturer:

"...it is so interesting and exciting to experience [the theories] hands-on and to see it unfold in real life - it makes it very real."

In the project, the lecturers were encouraged to find their externship partners themselves, which meant that they would often make use of personal relations, colleagues' relations and/or more formalized partnerships. This was also reflected in the questionnaire, where a large part of the companies indicated, that they participated in the project because of previous relations with either the institution or the lecturer. Companies that did not already have relations with either the lecturer or the institution chose to participate in the program in order to support the idea of future collaborations - as illustrated by one company representative:

"It is important that lecturers at institutions of higher education are updated on 'life in practice' - and vice versa."

Upon completion of the externship, a majority of the participating companies (25 out of 29) would like to receive another teacher extern and a corresponding amount of company representatives would recommend other companies to participate in a similar cooperation with the educational institutes. However, a few companies indicated in the questionnaire and interviews that they did not want further cooperation with the educational institutions, despite the fact that the externship had been a great success and the companies would recommend other companies to participate in similar programs. According to the lecturers who did their externship within these particular companies, there were various reasons for this discrepancy. In some cases the companies had agreed to participate in the externship program because they knew the company representative very well on a personal level. In other cases, the companies might have been very satisfied with the cooperation with the extern, but were still reluctant to invite in a new lecturer, because they were afraid that a new extern would

not be able to live up to the first one. This goes to show that the process of building inter-organizational ties is by no means straight-forward, and that despite the success of one specific externship, companies might not be ready for a more formalized partnership, which suggests that although personal bonds may lead to broader inter-organizational ties, they may also stand in the way – or at least not be conducive to – organization-level collaboration if the bonds are too strong or only perceived as involving the individuals.

Despite the above, a vast majority of the participants (lecturers and company representatives) did state that the externship contributed in strengthening the inter-organizational collaboration between institutions of higher education and public and private organizations – responses, which are further supported by testimonials from the interviews:

“I think the externship has built the foundation for a future cooperation. Just the fact that we now have a trustful relation, makes it so much easier to call and enquire about future research opportunities.”

Or, as another participant puts it:

“The externship has given me and the study program so much; a new internship opportunity for one of my students, they have offered to come and give talks about the industry to the students, to deliver real-life cases for my lectures and so on. And all of this wouldn’t have been possible without me putting myself out there.”

26 out of 29 company representatives replied in the questionnaire that they had a good dialogue with the lecturers, and that they would like to continue the cooperation with the educational institutions after the externship had ended. The companies also believe that they have been able to contribute with new knowledge to the lecturers – an understanding that is largely shared by the participating lecturers.

On the other hand, only half of the companies believe that they have gained new knowledge from the externs, which could indicate that the dialogue between company representatives and lecturers have been more of a one-way dialogue than initially anticipated. When reading closer into the data, it becomes clear that there is a correlation between the number of days lecturers have spent in the companies and the depth of the dialogue that has manifested from the externship. Thus, the companies that have experienced the least amount of knowledge transfer from the lecturers are also the ones that have been host companies for the shortest duration of time (1-2 days). Similarly, companies that have had externs for a full week or more all report back that they have gained significantly more knowledge from the lecturers. It can therefore be deducted that there seems to be a connection between the length of the externship and the depth of the inter-organizational collaboration between institutions of higher education and public and private organizations – observations, which fit very well to previous international research, stating that externships of a duration of minimum one



week should be aimed for. All of the above aside, data from the project does also demonstrate examples of very successful short-term externships (externships of a duration of 1-3 days), which have various benefits; they give the lecturer the opportunity to visit more companies, thereby giving them a broader understanding of the industry, the short-term externships put less strain on the companies in terms of planning, and they make it possible for the lecturers to bring home a broader network of companies.

## Conclusion

International research demonstrates that when it comes to the theory-practice challenge, there are no easy fixes (Haastrup et al, 2013). However, findings in this paper show that while some of the participating lecturers and organizations saw the externship primarily as a one-way process in which 'practice' informed 'theory', others were able to use the externship as an exchange between 'theory' and 'practice'.

Furthermore, a vast majority of the participants saw the externship as a starting point for further collaboration between the participating institutions of higher education and the public and private organizations. Whereas personal relations were, in most cases, the lecturers' point of access into the organization, in all but a few cases the hosting organizations were ready to extend collaboration beyond the participating lecturer at the end of the externship.

Thus, there does seem to be reason to suggest that teacher externships provide a possibility for initiating and/or facilitating inter-organizational collaboration between institutions of higher education and public and private organizations.



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