

## Chapter 2

# Enhancing the Academic Internship Learning Experience for Business Education—A Critical Review and Future Directions

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### Introduction

The transition from life as a student to the world of work is not always easy and can bare a lot of difficulties. Graduates have to adapt to a new working world when they enter the job market, e.g., applying their theoretical knowledge to a work-related context. Often it is assumed that business graduates can directly transfer their knowledge from business education to the workplace and use their acquired skills in their first job (Arts et al. 2006; Mintzberg 2004). However, both research and practice indicates that this is often not the case and that graduates underperform when starting their first job (Arts et al. 2006; Tynjälä 2008). The transition can be eased when graduates know what they are getting into. Tynjälä (2008) indicated that school learning should adopt certain features of work learning in order to integrate theory and practice. Integration can be done through “mediating tools” like academic internships (Tynjälä 2008). Academic internships are defined as an opportunity to integrate work-related experience into graduate education by participating in scheduled and supervised

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work (Gault et al. 2010). These real-world experiences are an integral component of an academic program and provide students with the opportunity to develop not only work skills but also an understanding of the workplace. In the following, the term internship is referring solely to academic internship for undergraduates.

Companies increasingly favor business graduates with work experience (McDonald et al. 2010). Companies expect business graduates to be prepared in terms of practical knowledge, generic and specific skills to start their professional career. However, recent research has highlighted that there is a considerable mismatch between expectations of companies and students (Birch et al. 2010; Gault et al. 2010, 2000; Hurst and Good 2010). For example, students expect to be trained during their internship, whereas companies expect students to be well-prepared before starting the internship so that companies have limited additional costs in training and supervision (Gault et al. 2000; Hurst and Good 2010). Given the mismatch between students' knowledge and skills on the one hand and the demands of companies on the other hand, business schools need to offer internships in order to bring more real-world experience into their curriculum.

The quality of internship learning heavily depends on the quality of feedback and supervision by both the company and the business schools (Narayanan et al. 2010). In order to enhance the learning experience of students while at internships, both companies and business schools have to find a way to effectively support, facilitate, and supervise students while they take and complete their internship. This may be accomplished through Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL). Information and communication technology (ICT) tools like web videoconferences or social media now have the power to provide a rich learning experience for students (Giesbers et al. 2009; Rienties et al. 2010) that is also easy to use for teachers and supervisors at the respective company. For example, research in internship supervision at a distance in medical schools has found that internships supported with ICT can be cost and time effective (de Leng et al. 2009). While these recent findings are promising, in business education the majority of internship students follow an internship at a larger geographical distance than medicine students. More importantly, the goals, tasks, and expectations of internships in business education are less clearly specified than in medical education.

Despite the increasing possibilities and affordances of ICT and the increased demand for internships by students and institutes alike, only a few studies exist on internships supervision at a distance through CSCL (Black and Bachman 2007; Carlson et al. 2001; Conroy and Khan 2009; Van Dorp et al. 2008). Clear evidence on the impact of internship supervision in business education through CSCL is still missing. By first reviewing the internship literature and the role of ICT in particular and afterwards conducting a concept-mapping exercise with 22 experts in business and economics education, this chapter aims to answer the following questions: (1) what is the added value of an internship for the three stakeholders according to the literature?, (2) what are the first insights into the implications for interaction between the three stakeholders in internship supervision at a distance?

### ***A Literature Review: The Functions of an Internship for Students, Companies, and Business Schools***

Work-based learning in the form of internships is increasingly important for business schools as they increasingly compete for excellent students, and, at the same time, try to establish strong relationships with leading companies. However, there is a lack of empirical research on the effective implementation of internships. Until recently, research on internships in various fields of economics and business has primarily focused on measuring the effectiveness of internships by comparing student perceptions and benefits only at the end of the internship (e.g., Schambach and Kephart 1999). There is a limited understanding of how business schools, students, and companies can effectively interact with each other before, during, and after completion of the internships. The role of an internship may be different for each stakeholder and will shape the way they want to interact with other stakeholders both in form and content. Therefore, a literature review was conducted to identify what each stakeholder is looking for in an internship and (if available) what is the potential role of ICT in the provision of the internship. This affects the information a stakeholder needs to have to make an internship a success and largely determines the form and content of the interaction. For example, a company may not be interested in being informed about all kind of rules and regulations the business school has.

Because of their relevance to the review, we have used the following databases: EBSCO, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Emerald Insight. The 19 search terms used in the four databases were: Internships, e-internships, internship satisfaction, student internships, academic internships, internship benefits, business education internship, internship programs, internship graduates, internship undergraduates, ICT internships, distance education internships, community of learners internships, collaborative learning internships, business student internships, work-based learning internship, accounting internship, internship literature review, virtual internships. In order to elaborate the scope of the articles found and to identify relevant articles that were not listed in the selected database, the reference lists of the articles were also taken into account as well as other articles written by the same authors concerning the same topic. The search resulted in 481 articles in total.

Only articles in the field of business and economics education were selected from the list because of their relevance for internships in our context. As a result, 66 articles were selected and reviewed ranging from 1988 to 2010. Afterwards, an in-depth review of these articles was conducted, whereby key terms were selected based upon a two-step approach. First, the important key terms regarding academic internships mentioned in each article were identified, whereby we labeled the key terms to the respective stakeholder(s). This method led to 57 key terms for students, 12 key terms for companies, and 30 key terms for business schools. In a second step, only key terms that were mentioned in five or more articles were defined as relevant for academic internships. This approach ensures that the general findings and trends from the literature are identified. Based on this procedure, 14 key terms were identified as often cited benefits for the three stakeholders. The key terms are

**Table 2.1** The functions of an internship for students, company and business schools (ranked on frequency of report in the literature)

Stakeholder	Key terms according to literature (frequency)
Students	Career preparation (14) Job satisfaction (11) Work-based learning (8) Develop communication skills (8) Develop job-related skills (8) Get sooner job offers (8) Develop a stronger resume (7) Receive feedback (6) Enhance student learning (6) Networking (6) Real-world experience (6)
Company	Talent screen (10)
Business schools	Reputation enhancement (6) Strengthen ties with corporate world (5)

listed in Table 2.1 and are ranked in descending order for each stakeholder starting with the most frequent key term. The table illustrates that most identified research addresses primarily the students' side of internships. This indicates relevance for an integrated approach to facilitate internship supervision at a distance.

### *Academic Internships Prepare Business Students for the Labor Market*

From the total of 14 key terms, 11 relate to students who follow an internship. There is a limited understanding in the literature on the support of internships through CSCL/ICT, as only four articles have specifically mentioned the role of ICT in internship supervision. Therefore only the important functions of internships for students are mentioned here as they can give an indication on the implementation of ICT in internship supervision.

Early studies have shown that accounting internship students improve their academic performance as well as their professional performance compared to students who do not follow an internship—thereby building a strong resume (English and Koeppen 1993; Knechel and Snowball 1987; Knouse et al. 1999; Siegel and Rigsby 1988). Students have the opportunity to acquire valuable experience by integrating the knowledge they gain during their studies in a real-world setting (Beenen and Mrousseau 2010; Hall et al. 1998; Maskooki et al. 1998; Muhamad et al. 2009). Furthermore, studies have shown that internship experience have an effect on career success. For example, the students received higher earnings afterwards in their first job (Callanan and Benzing 2004; Gault et al. 2000; Knemeyer and Murphy 2002). Students also have the possibility to gain appreciation of professional careers and specific skills needed for success in their chosen profession (Beard 2007; Knouse and Fontenot 2008; Maskooki et al. 1998). These experiences provide more realistic job expectations for students (Knouse et al. 1999).

Furthermore, students can develop good working habits and other personal qualities by following an internship. For example, students become more confident in order to contribute towards enhancing the early employment experiences (Birch et al. 2010; Cannon and Arnold 1998; D'abate et al. 2009; Gault et al. 2000; McCollum and Schoening 2004; Sapp and Zhang 2009; Taylor 1988). Students also enhance their interpersonal and communication skills during an internship (Beck and Halim 2008; Brown and Murphy 2005; Sapp and Zhang 2009). As a consequence, students will receive sooner and more high-quality job offers (Gault et al. 2010; Knouse and Fontenot 2008; Knouse et al. 1999; Mello 2006; Rothman and Lampe 2009).

According to the literature, students get the most out of their internship experience when they receive sufficient and relevant feedback from both their academic and company supervisor (Narayanan et al. 2010). Giving feedback of both, the performance and learning opportunities, are key predictors in a study about internship satisfaction (D'abate et al. 2009). In addition, studies reported that feedback is considered as an important element in maintaining the quality of the internship program and supervisors should provide appropriate feedback on the interns' tasks (Brooks et al. 1995; Johari and Bradshaw 2006; Narayanan et al. 2010).

Finally, it is reported that students get the opportunity to network for their first job after graduation, get insights into job-related skills, and as a result experience a higher job satisfaction in their first job (Cook et al. 2004; D'abate et al. 2009; Gault et al. 2000; McCollum and Schoening 2004; Narayanan et al. 2010; Schambach and Dirks 2002). Recent studies have also highlighted the potential advantages for internships. In 2009, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE 2009) in the United States has found that despite the reduction in hiring, students who followed an internship had a distinct advantage to obtain a job above non-internship students. A recent study in the UK has shown similar results (McDonald et al. 2010). However, there are also some drawbacks for students. For example, recent development has shown that students feel exploited by the employers who hire interns without financial compensation. A second drawback is that the learning objectives are not always clear although they play an important role in order to get the most out of the internship experience (Narayanan et al. 2010).

### ***Companies are Looking for Future Employees***

The literature identified talent screening as the most cited key term for companies that offer internships. Companies increasingly favor graduates with work experience (Beard 1998) and therefore expect student to be prepared in terms of practical knowledge. Several articles indicated that companies use the internship placement to recruit and select future employees (Beckett 2006; Coco 2000; Divine et al. 2008; Gault et al. 2000; Hurst and Good 2010; Mello 2006; Weible 2010). The costs for hiring are low when graduates can be screened during their internship and it is a suitable method to create a better fit between the intern as a prospective employee and the company (Beard 1998). Internships provide needed part-time help for certain tasks

and employees for special projects that run for a few months (Beard 1998; Divine et al. 2008; Thiel and Hartley 1997). During the internship companies can benefit from the exposure to new ideas coming from the interns and each other's knowledge exchange (Beard 1998; Divine et al. 2008; Tovey 2001; Weible 2010). Employers also indicated that they have a lower turnover rate for employees with internship experience (Beard 2007).

Disadvantages for companies may be that students who are following an internship often do not have any work experience and need guidance in their daily work (Birch et al. 2010). Furthermore, they also may need training and extensive support and feedback before they can become a productive part of the company. This implies that companies have to balance supervisor costs with potential benefits of attracting new employees.

### ***Business Schools Improve Their Curriculum***

According to the literature, business schools are looking for reputation enhancement and strengthening ties with the corporate world. Internships offered in the curriculum can lead to a stronger connection between business schools and the business world and can boost the reputation of the educational institution within the local community (Beard 2007; Divine et al. 2007; Gault et al. 2000; Mello 2006; Weible 2010). For example, making contact with the community can increase the corporate support for the institutions in terms of research grants and equipment (Beard 1998; Coco 2000; Thiel and Hartley 1997).

Business schools also have more opportunities for professional consulting and research support, thereby receiving support for their programs and feedback on their curriculum (Beard 1998; Thiel and Hartley 1997; Weible 2010). Building a network via internships makes it easier to bring managers into the courses at business schools (Divine et al. 2008). Internships add to the learning experience of students and increase the attractiveness of the business school to prospective students (Divine et al. 2007; Gault et al. 2000; McDonald et al. 2010). At the same time this can also increase the placement opportunities for graduates.

### ***A Need for Integration of Expectations and Support for Internship Supervision at a Distance***

Although the current literature gives a good overview of the functions of internships for each of the three stakeholders, there is still surprisingly little empirical research on the dynamics and interactions between the stakeholders that occur during internships supervision (at a distance). In particular, only a few research articles on internships have provided in-depth understanding on the interactions of the three stakeholders (Birch et al. 2010; Hurst and Good 2010).

Furthermore, in the last years ICT has become a much used tool that provides a rich learning experience for students at a distance. Yet, only a few studies have addressed how ICT can enhance and support the learning experience of students, provide more value for companies, and enhance the relevance for business schools during internships (Black and Bachman 2007; Carlson et al. 2001; Van Dorp 2008). These studies have shown that students, company, and business school are aware of the potential benefits of internship supervision at a distance. However, they do not address the interaction between the three stakeholders using ICT tools. Therefore, in the remainder of this chapter, we will elaborate on a concept-mapping exercise among 22 experts within the field of business and economics education who were discussing key terms of internship provision and support. We, in addition, asked these experts to discuss and reflect upon the potential use of ICT in internship supervision at a distance.

## Method

Expert knowledge about attitudes and opinions of internship supervision at a distance was elicited by using a concept-mapping exercise (Giesbers et al. 2007; Hughes and Hay 2001). In this exercise, techniques as brainstorming, concept clustering, and concept sorting were combined to generate in-depth data on viewpoints from experts in the field. According to Cooke (1994), the mentioned techniques are most suitable in knowledge elicitation exercises that involve multiple experts. This method leads to a sumptuous collection of information in a short time and helps to identify the main concepts. The literature review showed that primarily the students' view is addressed and lacks a deeper insight into the view of the company and business school.

Experts in the field of student learning, business and economics education, and E-learning from 15 business schools in six different countries (Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, UK, United States) were set up during a workshop on internship supervision at the 17th EDiNEB conference.<sup>1</sup> One drawback of a concept-mapping exercise is that experts might be inclined to express their own concerns, agenda, or focus rather than expressing the concerns from a range of stakeholders. However, to encourage experts to explicitly take into consideration the perspective of all the three stakeholders, the 22 experts got a general introduction of the purpose of the study and were randomly divided into three groups. Each group represented one of the three stakeholders in order to get a complete overview and, more importantly, to get a first insight into the interaction between students, company, or business school. For each stakeholder, one of the authors moderated the discussion. The participants discussed the use of ICT in the support of internship supervision at a distance and the expectations therein of students, companies, or business schools.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.edineb.org/>. During the international EDiNEB conference in London 2010, leading managers, researchers, and teachers in business and economics discussed innovations, good-practices, and successful integration of innovation in business and economics education.

The three moderators raised the following questions as guidelines for the knowledge elicitation process.

The following questions refer to internship supervision at a distance:

- What information would be important for you before, during, and after your internship?
- What information would be less important?
- What role would you like your student/company supervisor/supervisor from business school to take?
- What actions should come forth of the role of the student/company supervisor/supervisor from business school?
- What communication means (ICT) would you prefer before, during, and after internship supervision at a distance?
- What according to you are the criteria for good (online) interaction between stakeholders?

The discussions lasted around 60 minutes. Each group was asked to write down the discussed topics as statements. Afterwards, a general round-up of all three groups of stakeholders was presented by one representative of the respective stakeholder group, which subsequently was followed by a general discussion that lasted 30 minutes. In this way, the various viewpoints and statements from each of the three ‘stakeholders’ were addressed, which sparked further discussion. The moderators encouraged all participants to contribute in the discussions. The statements were collected and integrated into a concept map, which was sent after the concept-mapping exercise to all the participating experts.

## Results

The results of the concept-mapping exercise led to 70 statements in total that were identified during the discussions as necessary preconditions for successful internship supervision and the respective role of ICT: 31 statements for students, 21 for companies, and 18 for business schools. All experts agreed that effective communication between the three stakeholders is a crucial factor to set up internship supervision at a distance and to facilitate the internship process. Yet, the concept-mapping exercise also revealed substantially differences between the three stakeholders on how to communicate with each other as well as differences on the internship supervision itself, as is illustrated in Fig. 2.1. The results are listed below, separately for each stakeholder.

### *Students Ask for High-Quality Internships*

The seven experts representing the student body divided their 31 statements into four categories: eight statements about clear expectations, eleven statements about the communication, seven statements about the quality of the internship program,

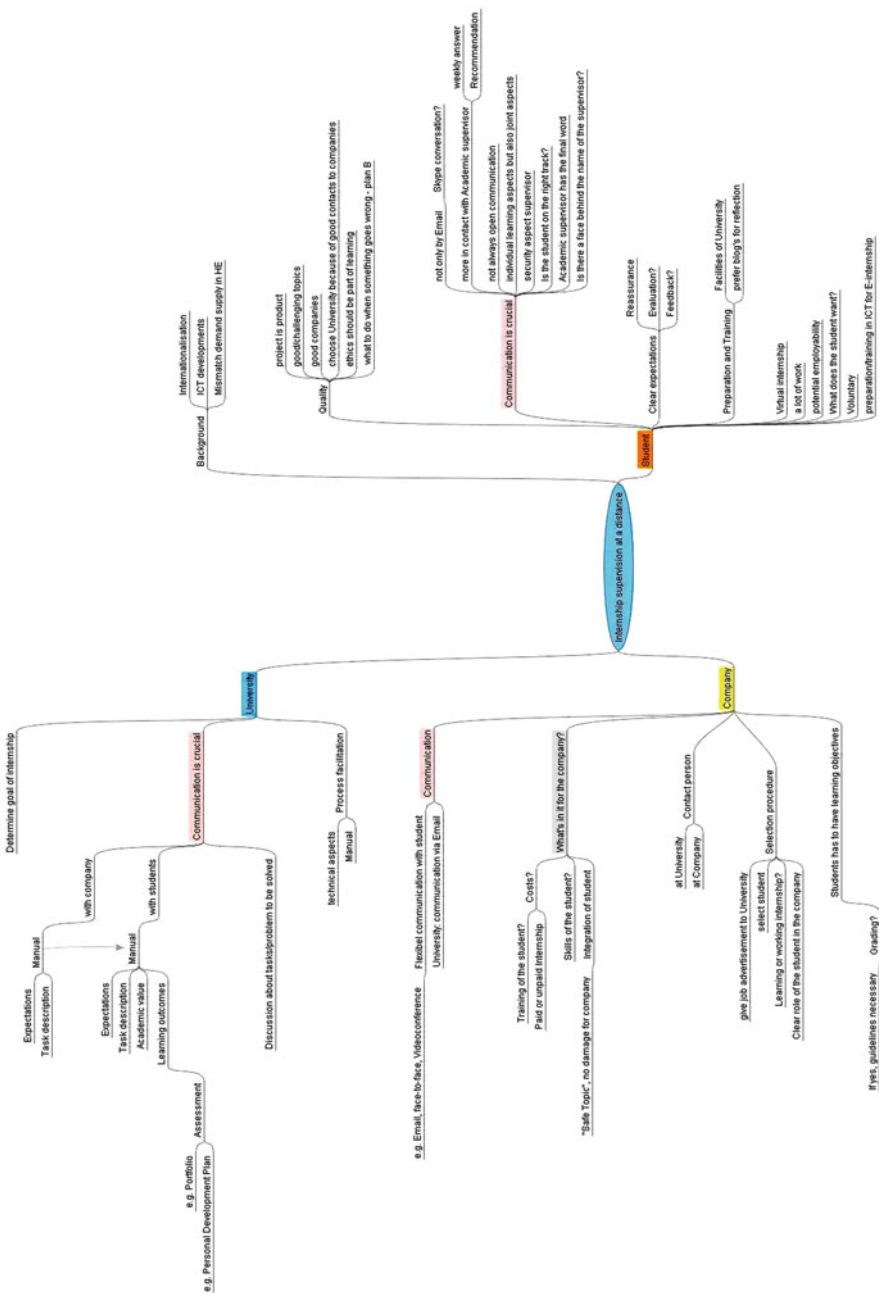


Fig. 2.1 Concept-mapping exercise internship and ICT tools

and the remaining four statements about training and preparation. The experts agreed that students need clear expectations in terms of tasks, workload, payment for the internship, and grading or evaluation. They consider this to be both a reassurance and a motivational stimulus for students to maximize their internships' learning experience. Furthermore the experts suggested that a direct academic supervisor at the business school should be available for questions on a weekly basis via email or telephone. The academic supervisor should monitor the tasks of the student and help out if necessary. A company supervisor should provide daily support to the student at the workplace. At the same time, the experts indicated that the quality of the project or tasks during the internships should be high in terms of challenging topics. Experts also stated that students prefer business schools with a high reputation that have useful business contacts to companies. Finally, the experts agreed that students need to be prepared for the internship by means of a formal training. Students need training for the use of ICT for internship supervision at a distance, e.g., special software.

### ***Companies Receive First Choice of Best Students***

In total, 21 statements were issued by the seven experts representing the company. The experts divided them into five categories: seven statements about the benefits for the company, five statements about the selection procedure, three about the contact person at the business school, three about the learning objectives, and three statements about the communication. The experts representing companies indicated that companies need to know the potential costs for hiring an intern. In general the internship should be unpaid and business schools should prepare the student for the internship. The experts stated that companies want to determine the topics and tasks on which the students will work in order to prevent damage to the company. The students should only work on 'safe' topics (i.e., low-risk activities) that have no further consequences when something goes wrong.

Furthermore, companies want to select the students for the internship positions themselves. According to the experts, companies expect to receive a clear guideline from business schools including learning objectives and how to assess the internships, e.g., grading. Finally, companies would like to be flexible in their communication with students, e.g., Email, face-to-face, or videoconferencing. The contact with the Business schools preferably takes place via Email only.

### ***Business Schools Want to Facilitate the Academic Internship Experience***

The eight experts representing business schools issued 18 statements, namely: 14 statements about communication, 3 about process facilitation, and 1 about the goal of the internship. According to the experts representing higher education, business

schools should determine the goal of the internship as well as facilitate the whole process. They have to set up a guideline where business schools specify what students should accomplish during their internship. The guideline should also contain information about selection procedure of students for particular internships and define the requirements for academic supervisors. Business schools also determine the learning outcomes together with the company and how to assess these during and after the internship, e.g., grading or giving credits. Finally, in order to enhance the learning experience of internship students, the experts urged business schools to build, maintain, and extend a network of excellent companies that provide excellent learning experiences for students.

### ***Collaboration Between the Three Stakeholders***

From a collaborative point of view it can be concluded that the experts representing the three stakeholders have substantially different expectations on how to work together. Experts representing the students want to have regular face-to-face contact with the company supervisor to get most out of the learning experience. The contact with the business school supervisor can primarily be done via Email or videoconference whereby students expect to be trained in the specific technology that will be used. Experts representing the business school stated that it is important for them to set the goals of the internship and assess the student's learning process. Business schools are primarily concerned about the quality of the internship program. Experts representing the company expect that the business school will provide a clear guideline of what the student has to learn. However, companies do not want the business school to interfere in the internship program and the intern's daily work.

### **Discussion**

The goal of this chapter was to examine the potential benefits and requirements of academic business internships and the implications for supervision at a distance by first conducting a literature review and afterwards conducting a concept-mapping with 22 experts from 15 business schools. The literature review revealed that there are several benefits for the three stakeholders—students, company, and business school during internships. According to the literature, the most frequently mentioned benefits are related to students, ranging from career preparation to sooner and better job offers. Companies use the internship primarily for a talent screening in order to hire excellent and talented new personnel. Finally, business schools can improve their reputation and future income streams by offering academic internships in their business curriculum. The literature review also revealed that there is a lack of empirical research on the interaction process that occurs between the three stakeholders before, during, and after the internship. Furthermore, the literature review revealed that at present only a limited number of studies (e.g., Conroy and Khan 2009; Van

Dorp 2008) have addressed the role of ICT in enhancing the learning experience of internships for business students. Given the enormous potential of ICT to provide a supportive community of learning for business schools, companies, and business students, we find this rather surprising.

The concept-mapping exercise aimed to provide a more elaborate understanding of the interactions of the three stakeholders through CSCL and identify how students, companies, and business schools can benefit from internships. Results of the concept-mapping exercise showed that the three actors have different views on the guiding principles of the collaboration. Experts in the company group prefer to stay in close contact with the student as they use the internship for talent screening in order to hire new excellent future employees. From the students' perspective, experts prefer to see the company supervisor face-to-face on a regular basis as well as their business school supervisor. As a result students transfer their knowledge from the business school to the company, but also learn from the company and transfer this knowledge back to the business school. The business school therefore needs to prepare the students for the internship by focusing on learning objectives and outcomes. The knowledge that the interns use during their placement can lead to a stronger learning and a higher satisfaction. While from a business school perspective, experts prefer to be entirely responsible for the preparation of the students, the success of the internship also depends on the company's actions. Business schools and companies would clearly benefit from collaborating together on the internship program by dividing the responsibilities beforehand in order to increase the students' learning outcomes and the quality of the internship experience. For example, companies can help in developing the internship program to provide students with the possibility to learn specific knowledge. This again may increase the possibility of employment with the company as well as the reputation of both the company and the business school and can affect future internship programs.

The concept-mapping exercise suggests that there is a significant difference between the viewpoints of the three stakeholders. In particular, goals and expectations of companies and business schools on internship selection, tasks, and supervision substantially differ, which most likely will lead to a clash of interests when companies and business schools are not explicitly addressing these differences. Also, internship experiences might vary greatly between students as well as their learning outcomes when there is no clear agreement about that between the stakeholders. Therefore, establishing a common understanding between the three stakeholders before starting the internship and a joint guidance of the internship students by both company and business school seems a necessity. ICT technology may provide a means to communicate more intensively together, helping to bridge the differences between the goals and expectations of the company and the university.

The interaction between students, business schools, and companies could be facilitated by creating a social network or community of learners. Therefore, the students, companies, and business schools are required to take a long-term view of internship programs to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. A social network approach would support this long-term view where the stakeholders can benefit from each other's experience to further improve the internship supervision.

## Limitations and Future Research

This research has demonstrated the need for future investigation of the collaboration between the three stakeholders. Some drawbacks need to be addressed by future research. The use of a concept-mapping exercise with experts in the field of student learning is limited to the experts' view. The primary goal was to get an overview of the aspects that they think play a role in the internship supervision at a distance. Given the wide representation of experts from a range of business schools from six countries, a comprehensive body of expertise and experience was present during the concept-mapping exercise, which strengthens the validity and generalization of our findings. Furthermore, by letting experts represent one of three distinctive stakeholders, we explicitly acknowledged that the experts should look beyond their own role in their institute. Given that the results indicate strong differences in the viewpoints among the three stakeholders, there seems to be evidence of experts "crossing their own borders" that have led to a substantial contribution of our understanding of the complex dynamics of academic internship learning experience for business education. Therefore, the results are an excellent stepping stone for further research in the direction of internship supervision at a distance and need empirical support. Based upon the literature review and recommendations of the experts, future research will focus on developing an online community program in the near future in order to further validate the findings and assess whether business students are able to benefit from internship supervision at a distance through CSCL.

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