

Are undergraduate internships worth the effort? Time to reconceptualize work-based learning for building protean meta-competencies

Abstract

Internships are widely recognized within higher education as a useful work-based learning (WBL) approach to enhance student employability. However there remains a need to understand whether internships provide a developmental experience that includes higher-level (soft) skills such as self-responsibility, flexibility and innovation. Our study inductively analyses 154 undergraduate student-interns' reflective diaries over a three-year period to explore the relationship between internship experience and development of higher-level skills, or protean 'meta-competencies'. In the research, we find the interns' developed three meta-competencies that can broadly be categorized as: *self-regulation*, *self-awareness* and *self-direction*. Our findings also highlight the role of socio-political dynamics of internship work in shaping students' experiences as an indicator of the changing world of work. The study has implications for higher education institutions (HEIs) and host organisations in adopting a WBL approach that supports interns with reflexive engagement with situated organizational practices and accessing (in)formal learning opportunities in the workplace. Our research therefore offers insights into a learner-centred WBL approach that contributes towards a more holistic internship/WBL experience that facilitates student-interns in developing protean meta-competencies and graduate employability.

Keywords: work-based learning, internship, meta-competencies, protean career, employability, higher education

Introduction

Employability is a key reason why many students seek higher education (Kim et al. 2022; Perusso and Wagenaar 2022), and there is a growing expectation of higher education institutions (HEIs) to produce skilled, employable graduates (Arranz et al. 2022; Bradley et al. 2022). Subsequently, many HEIs now embed work-based learning (WBL) in the form of internships, or work placements, within their curriculum to support graduate employability (Jackson and Rowe 2023; Raelin 1997; Lester and Costley 2010). This may involve undertaking ‘short-term practical work experience’, eligible for credit as students receive ‘training and gain experience in a specific field or career area of their interest’ (Zopiatis 2007: 65).

With changing work conditions and labour market structures (Scott 2015), there are calls for graduates to engage in lifelong learning, diagnosing their own learning needs, and building ‘portmanteau’ or ‘portfolio’ careers (Eberhard et al. 2017). Given that career paths are no longer linear, HEIs need to support students in developing higher-level (soft) employability-skills as graduates may well be spending periods of time in different work-arrangements, such as established organizations or start-ups, self-employment, consultancy or even a combination of several roles (see Ryder and Downs 2022; Santos, 2020).

Despite the usefulness of WBL as a work-readiness pedagogy, it has been critiqued for its siloed approach (Wall et al. 2017), due to its focus on prescribing generic skills and knowledge to students (Felstead and Unwin 2016). This approach is deemed less helpful for supporting students to develop portfolio careers (Eberhard et al. 2017) and dealing with the complexities of the modern-day workplace. Employers are also becoming concerned about graduates’ lack of relevant skills, or the ‘skills-gap’, as they enter the labour market (Arranz

et al. 2022; Perusso and Wagenaar 2022). Scholarship in career development argues that individuals with protean meta-competencies are better poised to engage with contemporary work environments and career paths (c.f. Donald et al. 2017; Sargent and Domberger 2007). While internships linked with WBL certainly contribute towards students' university-to-work transition (Kim et al. 2022; Bradley et al. 2022), there is little research exploring whether they adequately prepare students to develop meta-competencies such as self-responsibility, adaptability, flexibility, inter-personal communication, and empathy (Hall 1996, 2004).

This study, therefore, sets out to explore the possibilities of developing protean meta-competencies within the context of (paid) internships as part of a WBL programme in a HEI. We contribute to scholarship on WBL (Raelin 1997, 2008; Boud and Garrick 1999; Boud and Soloman 2001; Lester and Costley 2010), by offering insights into how individualized WBL curricula and its corresponding internship design with host organisations can be used to support students in developing protean meta-competencies (Hall 1996, 2002; Lester and Costley 2010). We define individualized learner-centred WBL curriculum as one that encourages individuals to engage in reflexive practices and develop an understanding about 'self-in-relation-to-others' within the context of situated organizational work-practices (Vince 1998, 2002).

Our study draws on 154 student-interns' monthly reflective logs submitted as part of a redesigned WBL curricula, to shed light on the challenges linked with socio-political work-dynamics that students experienced during their internship. In this paper, we argue that informal and often serendipitous work-situations provide opportunities for student-interns to develop protean meta-competencies as way to negotiate workplace challenges. We identify the protean meta-competencies as self-regulation, self-awareness and self-direction. While

our study offers implications for HEIs and host organisations with a focus on individualized WBL curricula, we also call for further research to focus on WBL pedagogies that support student-interns in developing protean meta-competencies (Kim et al. 2022).

Theorizing protean meta-competencies and undergraduate internships

Literature considers protean meta-competencies as those that facilitate individuals to achieve self-fulfilment as well as developmental career progression (Donald et al. 2017; Sargent and Domberger 2007). Protean meta-competencies help individuals develop psychological durability to apply a diverse range of skills and identify personal learning needs throughout one's (portmanteau) career by accessing informal and formal learning opportunities (Hall 1996, 2004; Hall and Mirvis 1995). According to the pioneer of protean career theory, Douglas T. Hall (1996), continuous learning and self-responsibility are core elements in developing the two protean meta-competencies his work identified: identity (akin to self-awareness) and adaptability. The notion of protean careers has emerged in response to the changing work and career structures where distinct boundaries surrounding job functions and professions have blurred, as individuals take up multiple work-roles as careers become boundaryless with multiple pathways being the norm (Briscoe and Hall 2006). This boundarylessness and flexibility, as described by Hall (1996), shows a greater need for developing protean meta-competencies to cope with the changing world of work.

From a WBL perspective, encouraging the development of protean meta-competencies as part of students' university-to-work transition will be important to support them in usefully engaging with complex work dynamics and sustaining pressures of the labour market (Kim et al. 2022). Traditionally, undergraduate students engage in a variety of work-related experiences during their internships with the aim to improve their employability skills

(Bradley et al. 2022). Some HEIs, however, make little effort to explicitly link internship experience to learning on degree-programmes, and as such internship may take place in isolation (Gateways to the Professions Collaborative Forum 2013). One approach to linking internships with a degree-programme is for student-interns to undertake projects related to the HEI curriculum, often underpinning a final year dissertation (Parker 2018). Other approaches include creating a portfolio of professional practice and/or the writing of reflective essays towards the end of the internship experience (Lang and McNaught 2013; Scholtz 2020).

Existing WBL pedagogical approaches, however, remain centred around the power of the validating institution, their definitions of learning, and criteria for evidencing that learning has taken place (Felstead and Unwin 2016). Research indicates that HEIs, engrossed in the process of formalizing WBL, tend to be less successful in supporting students to meaningfully engage and learn from complex situated organizational realities and even influence micro-level changes within work-situations (Illeris 2012; Hinnings and Greenwood 2002). For example, scholars argue that existing WBL approaches tend to be institution-led and are siloed and/or bolted-on, and therefore become either too rigid or generic to acknowledge learner-specific needs at work (Felstead and Unwin 2016; Wall et al. 2017). This further contributes to the criticism of the graduate 'skills-gaps' (Arranz et al. 2022).

More recently, literature has raised concerns about assumptions around the supposedly linear pathways of graduate careers, and that little attention has been given to student-interns' struggles in developing employability skills amid workplace complexities and challenges (e.g., precarious or meaningless work) (Arranz et al. 2022; Kapareliotis et al. 2019). Research also suggests that protean competencies can be difficult to plan for through predetermined learning activities in the workplace (Van de Werfhorst 2014). Our theorization of internships

in higher education contributes to calls for reconceptualizing WBL to support students in coping better with complex organisational phenomena and the changing demands of the labour market (Donald et al. 2017; Sargent and Domberger 2007).

Building on the work of scholars such as Basit et al. (2015), we contend that adjusting traditional institution-led WBL approaches towards a more learner-centred internship experience could offer student-interns more fruitful opportunities for developing protean meta-competencies. This is important as literature suggests that those who are at the periphery of organizations (e.g., temporary workers, interns) tend to find limited access to opportunities of learning (e.g. Sides and Mrvica 2017), which can impact students' university-to-work transition (Perusso and Wagenaar 2022; Okolie et al. 2019; Bradley et al 2022). Along with other scholars, we argue for WBL pedagogies to move beyond the scope of prescribed curricula, to one that encourages students' holistic thinking and reflexive evaluation of their experience and engender new ways of conceptualizing and problematizing work practice (Anderson 2008; Svanström et al. 2008). For example, being able to reflexively evaluate the social, cultural, political and historical dimensions of the workplace is particularly useful in the context of interns as learning in workplace is often '...realised through the expertise and understanding [of experts]' (Koskinen, Pihlanto and Vanharanta 2003, 281).

Methodology

This study draws on the experiences of 154 student-interns enrolled on a WBL module across three cohorts at a UK business school. As part of this module, the students were required to undertake a year-long paid internship with a host organisation. The majority of students were aged in their early 20s and studying in the third year of an undergraduate degree programme.

The students were placed at over 80 different organizations (or ‘hosts’) after taking part in competitive recruitment rounds. These host-organizations were of varying sizes, and situated locally, nationally and globally, the internships lasting between 9 and 12 months.

The WBL module adopted a learner-centred individualized curricula that required each student to create their own internship learning objectives and plan (i.e. a learning agreement), in partnership with their employer and HEI – a tripartite approach. The learning plan focused on identifying key (usually soft) skills and set out a range of learning opportunities for skills-development. The next stage was for the three partners to agree how learning would be evidenced with assessment criteria focussing on the need for framing evidence to highlight employability skills. The students could adopt different formats for presenting evidence of employability skills-development rather the HEI setting out specific formats for submitting a report or a grading criterion.

As part of the module, students had to submit monthly reflective logs over the course of their internship, capturing work-based learning incidents (usually informal learning) and developing action-plans. These monthly logs were unassessed pieces and were included to facilitate students in developing a reflective essay at the end of their year-long internship. Before starting their internship, students were introduced to the notion of reflective practice and associated learning theories through lectures, readings and workshops spread over three weeks. They were encouraged to select a model of reflection (although this was not obligatory) where models used included Schon (1983), Kolb (1984), Gibbs (1988), Johns (2000) and Lawrence-Wilkes (2015).

After securing data-access approval from the relevant business school’s research ethics committee, the students were informed of the study’s focus and intended use of their monthly reflective logs as data source. We also communicated to the students that any information that may reveal identity of students, staff and/or employing organisations will be removed from the data before it is released for the study. As an additional measure, we agreed that the data will be used in any research output only after the students had completed their internships, the associated module, and graduated from the university. Also, using non-assessed pieces of student-writing for the research helped mitigate concerns around forceful or superficial production of data.

A total of 1232 monthly reflective logs were compiled and used for analysis. The average length of each log was around 460 words, producing a dataset of 566887 words (see Table 1).

Table 1: Overview of the Dataset

Cohort	Year of cohort (c)*	Participants (s)**	Gender (Male, Female) distribution	Monthly (x12) logs	Size of dataset (words & pages)
1	2014–15	36	53% M; 47% F	288	123348 words (206 pages)
2	2015–16	61	56% M; 44% F	488	280551 words (445 pages)
3	2016–17	57	64% M; 36% F	456	162988 words (256 pages)
	3 years	154	58% M; 42% F	1232	566887 words (907 pages)

* Code name for cohort is C along with the year. For example, C14, C15 or C16

** Code name for students is S along with their participant number. For example, S1, S2 or S3...

For data analysis, we adopted a reflexive thematic approach in categorizing the patterns in the data (e.g. Braun and Clarke 2006; 2019). The data analysis unfolded in three iterative phases, during which the individual researchers developed a series of codes built from their personal reflections on the meaning of the data, exploring the intersections between theoretical interpretation and empirical data to make sense of how student-interns experienced work-related learning and negotiated workplace complexities as part of their internships (see Table 2).

Table 2: Analytical Framework

PHASES OF ANALYSES	ANALYTICAL FOCUS	ANALYTICAL FRAMING (QUERYING DATA)	ANALYTICAL TECHNIQUES	KEY ACTIVITIES	OUTCOME
Phase One	Piecing Together Reflective Logs	What are students saying about their internship role and how do they implicate themselves? How are they constructing this narrative over a period?	Content and Frequency of occurrence using CAQDAS (Wmatrix)	Reading reflective logs; identifying initial concepts separately by authors	First Order Codes (<i>Feed-forward</i>)
Phase Two	Internship Role	What claims are students making about their representation as interns? How do students see themselves and what do they make of others?	Plot identification using First Order Codes	Re-reading and piecing together individual accounts across time; Refining initial concepts; Collectively benchmarking codes as author team	Second Order Code Categories (<i>Feed-forward</i>)

Phase Three	Internship Experience	How do students enact and experience their role? Are there any difference, similarities or competing narratives about interns in host organizations?	Comparative Analysis (across cases) using CAQDAS (Wmatrix)	Re-reading and identifying variations across accounts; Compiling second order codes and categories into aggregate dimensions	Aggregate Dimensions (higher/order skills/competencies for a protean career)
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The co-authors engaged in reflective discussions and collaborative mind-mapping that allowed not only mitigating individual researcher’s bias and assumptions but also considering different interpretations in developing an understanding of the inter-related themes within the data (Byrne 2022). The approach meant initial codes were diverse, reflecting the differing engagements with the material (Braun and Clarke 2019; Byrne 2022). The resulting codes were discussed, compared and reworked amongst the co-authors for consistency purposes as well as to identify the main narrative. This process led to generating 924 labels for coding data (see Table 3).

Table 3: Sample Codes

Code	Frequency	Sample Text
Self-efficacy	521	‘The ability to reflect on my self-efficacy in my work placement year by analysing the effects the incident had on myself has allowed me to learn further about myself and workplace environments’
Frustration	46	‘Frustration eventually turned into powerlessness as the regulatory changes pushed project completion out of my reach’
Anxiety	32	‘I started developing a sense of anxiety, as I felt personally responsible; this was nurtured by a growing feeling of personal inadequacy’

Managers, Manager	361	‘I thought I was being taken advantage of by some of my managers in regard to being asked to complete administrative tasks which should have been handled by them’
Self-Perception	33	‘Throughout this experience, I learnt that my capabilities go beyond my self-perception and that my desire to stay within my comfort zone often holds me back’
Team, Teams	472	‘Also, simply down to the fact that I was a 'student' and the youngest member of the team, with minimal experience during certain crises such as this’
Others, Other	223	‘I suppose the perception of others on my capabilities prevented me from becoming more competent and involved in certain tasks’

The second phase was concerned with the student-interns’ experience and their ability to negotiate different situations during their internships, that is, the attributions of themselves, others and their work. The reflective text was recoded with particular attention to metaphors or analogies used to describe events, actions or feelings unfolding in their narratives. For example, we used analytical reasoning by questioning ourselves: ‘To whom is the intern referring?’, ‘What does this mean for their experience?’ and ‘Does this have an impact on how they view themselves, others or their work?’ This phase eventually concluded by collapsing codes into categories (see Table 4).

Table 4: Sample Code Categorization

Code	Category
Stress, Frustration, Anxiety, Disappointment, Fear, Nervous, Anger, Proud, Satisfaction/Satisfy, Appreciate, Pride, Enjoy [...]	Feelings and Emotions
Managers, Members, Stakeholders, Peers, Co-Workers, Leaders, Speakers [...]	Roles, Responsibilities and Functions

Control, Inability, Factors, Response, Navigate, Discomfort, Difficult/Challenging [...]	Situation, Event, or Incident
Learn/Learning/Learnt, Develop/Developing, Improve/Improvement/Improving, Equip/Equipping, Confident, Capability, Trust/Trusting [...]	Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities
Manage/Managing/Management, Lead, Internship, Ethic/Ethos, Opportunity/Opportunities, Task/Tasks, Projects/Project	Work and Workplace
Communicate/Communicating/Communication, Engage/Engaging/Engagement, Other, Others, People, Team	Relationships

The third phase focused on aggregating categories into higher-order concepts through identification of associations and continuous dialogue among authors to theorize reflective text. This led to associating textual narratives with code-categories describing student-interns' experience about working, learning and internships as they were produced and maintained within the internship context. Bunching of codes into categories in relation to theory led to six sub-themes (*expectations and situations; precarity and temporality; positionality vs realisation; worker vs learner; adaptability; coping and alignment*).

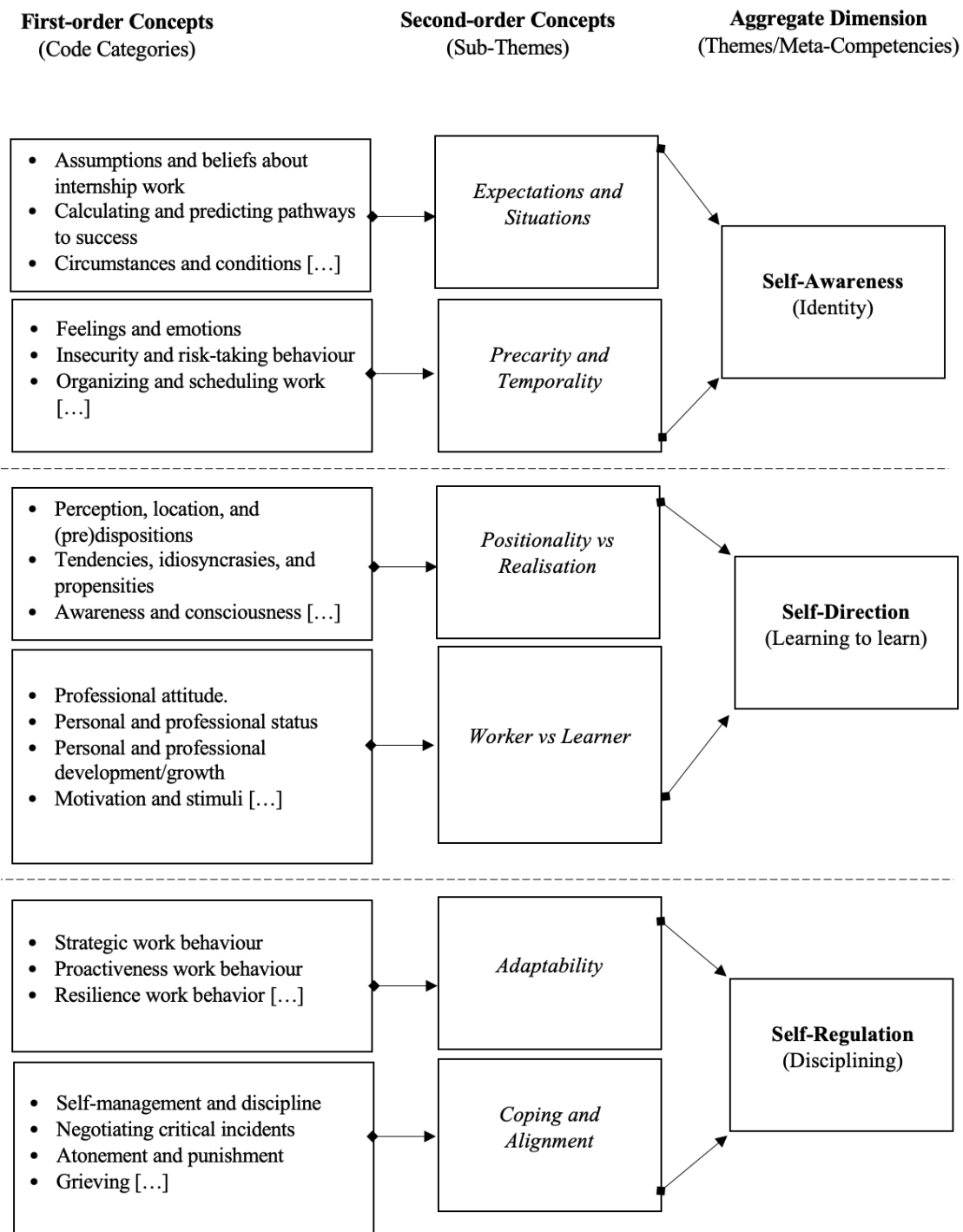
Familiarity with the data encouraged identification of patterns of significance allowing the team to identify three distinct themes (*self-awareness, self-direction; and self-regulation*).

These themes (or meta-competencies) consequently emerged as a result of cycling between data and theory over the three analytical phases (Braun and Clarke 2019).

Findings

Findings of this study are presented under aggregate dimensions which shed light on the meta-competencies that student-interns allude to in their experiences as they negotiate the complexities of the workplace (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Data Structure and Findings



Self-awareness

Self-awareness, akin to a sense of self or identity (c.f. Hall 1996, 2004) in the workplace, requires an understanding of how individuals and their work roles are interconnected as they do not perform their work in isolation rather, they respond to expectations and situations. For example, when actions are incongruent with self-beliefs or others' expectations, they are likely to create tensions between individuals, others and their role in the workplace. Several students highlighted that such discrepancies are likely to arise when expectations mismatch with the performative dimension of the internship role. One intern reflected that the way she was predisposed to behaving in the workplace was entirely different to what her line-manager expected her to do. She wrote that the implicit expectation of an intern was to sit quietly in a meeting whereas she considered herself as knowledgeable coming from a business school.

[...] members often asked me for clarifications and to me this was reassuring that I was acting the right way and that they saw me as a source of knowledge. [Upon reflection] I got to know, I should've acted differently by being quieter and not participating in the meetings [...] Thinking back to the time, I interpreted the event in a manner that was consistent with my emotions and expectations at that time. Had I known my boss' expectations, I would have acted differently [c14-s31].

It was also evident that self-other expectations are critical in understanding how students identify themselves and others at work. Interns also highlighted instances where they tried to reform their identity to meet with others' expectations, as noted below:

Being on placement means that it is imperative to work in a flexible manner and always expect the unexpected, but it is also important to be honest and transparent to colleagues about the reality of meeting their expectations. In doing so, I anxiously decided to send out my 360 surveys again to see whether people's perception of me has changed [c15-s23].

Another intern, working for a graphic design firm, said that during her work there were times when she disagreed with her teammates. When her work mentor asked to change this attitude and style towards her colleagues, she finally resorted to 'following the expectations and

wants of the people [she was] working for'. This is largely evident in accounts across the reflective logs where self-awareness (or identity) in the workplace was directly linked to the temporary nature of their role. This then seems to invoke a condition of precarity or instability in how they should act, behave and are seen by others (Garsten 1999). Although the accounts varied in terms of interns' understanding of their temporary roles, there was a common thread of disappointment, anguish, and a lack of self-belief. An intern placed at a leading supermarket expressed:

I feel a bit frustrated because of the lack of work and learning opportunities. I feel that this is only because I am a temporary trainee [c15-s41].

Despite the precarious position of interns, some interns perceived their temporary status as a blessing ('buffer') – one reflected that:

My manager has been lenient to me regarding this, it's probably because of my trainee level and temporary employee status [c15-s34].

This was not mostly the case, as a large proportion felt frustrated due to lack of opportunities for learning. An intern working in an IT firm said:

The reason why I am not given much responsibility is because I am only a temporary employee. As a result, my line manager might not see much return on investment in training me for more complicated and demanding skills, since I will leave the firm anyway [c14-s19].

Studies (e.g., Hall, 1996) suggest that self-awareness opens the possibility of understanding the political aspects of work. The process of reflection (on the self) can help formulate conceptions about the work interns perform as knowledge and identity are not theoretically disparate (Alvesson and Willmott 2002). Reflection can play a critical role, especially in transitional phases of life, where identities are in flux and changing to resolve tricky conceptions about the self, for example, in relation to the internship (e.g., Gotsi et al. 2010; see also Perusso and Wagenaar 2022; Bradley et al 2022).

Self-direction

Findings indicate that self-direction is important as it can instil responsibility-taking behaviour. In negotiating role and relational dynamics, intern accounts reflect their struggles as being socially situated as either workers or learners. One intern placed in a car rental firm suggested that despite his efforts to develop stronger relationships with his teammates he was still treated as an ‘outsider’.

I could’ve done more socializing to get a bit more personal with my colleagues, but I couldn’t, partly because of my introversion, age difference and also background [c15-s42].

Besides this, interns’ age also acted as a barrier, heightening the self-imposed desire to be seen as an acceptable colleague. In one of the reflections, an intern placed at a reputed engineering firm indicated that it was emotionally and physically draining for her to work with colleagues who thought that she was seen as ‘childish’ by others. She writes that her internship was difficult because of how dependent she was on others to help her at work.

This was not how I’d imagined writing my April log, but it’s about an important aspect that truly interferes with my working life [...] I am quite dependent on other people, emotionally speaking as well as in the form of outsourcing my life. I had to deal with difficult things, admin stuff on my own. This has impacted significantly on my placement year especially as I’ve been often seen as childish and not yet a proper adult, ready to take on full responsibilities [c14-s29].

Her reflections inform us about her efforts to be seen as collegial. However, they also show how some employers view young people. This creates additional pressure on student-interns on top of the existing issues relating to the temporary nature of their role. Our research shows how individuals draw on a variety of organisational, social, normative and discursive resources to identify themselves with the work they perform. One intern working for an automobile manufacturer in the UK stated that he had to modify his own style and personality to avoid ‘annoying’ his manager to look more ‘professional’ [c14-s11]:

I made sure that even though I don't have the best relationship with my boss, I mimicked my PR manager's style of constant communication with my boss even if I felt nervous to talk to her [c14-s11].

The intern later indicated that it was beneficial to copy someone else (a role model) as he learnt an important 'professional' skill of how to communicate with others in the workplace. This was also apparent in another intern's reflective log suggesting that behaving and acting professionally was the key to placement work. Working for a global home electronics manufacturer, the intern recalls how he was treated, as a 'less important member of the team'. After raising this issue with his line-manager he wrote the following:

[Line-Manager] replied that she would take care of this, but I was very offended! Although I was prepared for the challenging attitude by others, I wasn't prepared for negative feedback neither regarding my ways of communicating in general nor my personal approach [...] What went well in this situation was that although I was feeling personally offended but I managed to behave professionally [c15-s37].

Interestingly, this intern went on to describe that suppressing feelings and continuing to act professionally was a 'learning curve' with the hope that his line-manager would trust him and offer more responsibilities because of the way he had handled such situations.

Self-regulation

Findings show *self-regulation* as a key competency of protean careers in two parts, that is, through instances 'adapting' to and 'coping' with internship role demands. Gotsi et al. (2010) argue that regulation and control strategies are organisational mechanisms deployed by managers to influence individuals in performing their work roles more efficiently and as desired. For example, an intern indicated that working in a pharmaceutical company was challenging because she couldn't fully experience the learning curve in her internship role. The reason behind this was her line-manager's expectations, seeing her as a worker rather than a learner:

This month has been one of great change to say the least. Although, I have learnt a lot but not least about office politics. When to say and not say things has become increasingly prominent but I realise that I need to make sure that I use my position as an intern to learn from this situation [...] despite the MD of the company stating that I was everything she looked for in a member of staff [c14-s7].

In other situations, some interns found it difficult to focus on their learner role in the firm. Their personal expectations of being temporary or at least seen as one was partly in conflict with role expectations in the firm. One intern recalled resisting taking up those roles which offered very little opportunities to learn. In his reflections he emphasized the importance of being an intern and matching roles with his interests:

I decided to be open and flexible to any roles however I emphasised that [role x] is not my preference. This caused conflict with my [ABC] team and was escalated to the team-lead who told me sternly to be more positive and proactive in the future [c16-s31].

The intern however continued to adapt by performing tasks which he deemed were necessary to the purpose of the internship (i.e., learning). He concluded that the ‘drawback’ of this was ‘earning a bad reputation’ in the host organisation.

Meanwhile, some other interns referred to various tactics deployed by their colleagues and managers to pressurize them in taking up roles or responsibilities that other permanent employees could perform. For example, one intern recalled how their manager ‘over-dramatize[d] situations’ making him feel worse if he wouldn’t consider performing a particular task, which affected his morale at work. In contrast, some interns reported that they weren’t provided with the opportunity to ‘raise their voice’ by managers and felt ‘forced’ to perform certain tasks.

I felt as though because I was the intern in the team, I was forced into helping others too much when I had an equally high if not higher level of workload [...] and had no time free. This made me feel annoyed because my team members did not appreciate that I was also working hard and that saying no [...] was actually a fair decision [c14-s2].

Findings in this category also inform us of interns' strategies to cope with the multiple demands put forward by the internship role (e.g. Watson 2009; Gotsi et al. 2010). Depending on the nature of tasks performed by/offered to interns, their ability to comprehend the performative dynamics of the role or sacrifice personal interests are dependent on many aspects which include future prospects (career), learning outcomes and self-reflexivity (introspection). One intern recalls how she managed to accept the less meaningful work presented to her by the line manager as a way of regulating herself to learn new knowledge.

She wrote:

I have learnt for the future that sometimes even less impactful roles or less prestigious assignments are worth taking as they can provide a valuable experience. It all depends on a person's attitudes, and I am happy that I managed to be proactive about that. With that mindset, I can build a great network and expertise during my current [project], which would be very helpful for the rest of my industrial placement as well as future career [c15-s36].

Another intern, working for a leading cosmetic brand, reflected that it is important for interns to understand that opportunities to work and learn in 'good companies' is 'rare'. Thus, it is 'vital' to embrace 'whatever comes your way' and to 'adjust' to demands. He wrote:

I started doubting myself, whether I would be able to cope with the knowledge barrier throughout this [placement] year? What can I do to maximise my outcome from this year? From this experience, I noticed that I had to take initiative in order to overcome my weaknesses, I need to be more proactive. It is essential to understand what the company offerings are [...] as they can be rare [c15-s44].

He further wrote, later, that whatever his line-manager offered him he accepted or learnt to accept because of the way the manager influenced him through storytelling. This involved thinking carefully about how to act as well as the 'knowledge' required to perform the role – another example of self-regulation.

Discussion and conclusion

Traditional WBL pedagogy, based on an acquisition model for skill development, is said to be limited in its focus to support students in developing higher-level (soft) skills needed in today's changing labour market conditions and complex work-environments (Perusso and Wagenaar 2022; Illeris 2012; Hinnings and Greenwood 2002). Our study adds to the literature on WBL in higher education as we highlight the relationship of internships, individualized curriculum and reflexive evaluation of barriers embedded within work-practices for student-interns in accessing (in)formal learning opportunities and developing protean meta-competencies (Raelin 1997, 2008; Boud and Garrick 1999; Boud and Soloman 2001; Lester and Costley 2010).

Through our findings, we argue for reconceptualizing WBL as a pedagogy (Jackson and Rowe 2023; Kim et al. 2022; Arranz et al. 2022; Bradley et al 2022) to go beyond surface level notions of incidental or experiential learning (Vince 1998, 2002), or as prescribed by generic curricula (Felstead and Unwin 2016; Wall et al. 2017). Our reconceptualization of WBL acknowledges the situatedness of student-interns within their social, cultural, political and historical circumstances (e.g., Lave and Wegner 1991) and the need for interns to engage in reflexive practice for developing protean meta-competencies as they negotiate workplace complexities. This is, as Hall et al. (2018) highlight, the importance of self-direction and personal values in developing protean meta-competencies, but unless students are highly self-aware of the significance of these underpinning characteristics, they may not be identified.

Our holistic, yet learner-centred WBL approach recognises workplace dynamics as a negotiated process and attempts to tackle the asymmetrical positioning of the student-intern, HEI and host-organizations in a tripartite stakeholder framework. One pedagogical practice in our WBL approach with such intended objective, was of negotiated learning agreement

(including learning outcomes and assessment strategies) between host organisations, student-interns and HEIs. It also included student-interns writing non-assessed reflective logs on work-based incidents, with a particular focus on socio-political dynamics at play within host organizations. Our findings suggest that such WBL pedagogical approach appears to offer student-interns' further opportunities in developing richer understanding 'self-in-relation-to-others', and this is said to foster 'empirically supported protean processes – identity awareness, adaptability and agency' (Hall et al. 2018, 2).

Active engagement of student-interns with host organisations in setting learning objectives and assessment strategies as part of our WBL, is likely to encourage a dialogue about the workplace as a site for learning, and enables the creation of individualised learning programmes, including opportunities for shared reflection (Santos 2020). However, this will expect HEIs to move away from institution-centric and skills-based forms of assessment to adopting an individualized WBL curriculum that focuses on empowering learners to assume greater responsibility and control of their learning (Jackson and Rowe 2023; Perusso and Wagenaar 2022; Raelin 1997; Lester and Costley 2010). This can be integrated with developing more creative forms of assessment, in partnership with educators and host organisations. One example of such an assessment is creation of a portfolio of professional practice that evidences the specific student learning outcomes to suit the needs of the student-intern and host organisation, as agreed in the learning agreement in consultation with educators at the HEI. This could involve using a variety of media such as websites, booklets, podcasts, blogs, etc. to create portfolios. We recognise these pedagogical actions alone may not resolve power differentials within the tripartite relationship inherent within an internship module. However, we however opine that adopting pedagogical steps (e.g., negotiated learning agreement) could enable open discussions about varying influence within the

tripartite relationship and offer further opportunities for student-interns assume control of their learning as well as develop protean meta-competencies (Raelin 1997; Hall 1996).

To conclude, we argue that HEIs ought to adopt assessment-designs and practices that encourage student-interns to reflexively process their internship experiences and make sense of work-related events, norms, practices and socio-political dynamics (Lester and Costley 2010). This however would imply HEIs having to forego some of their influence over the tripartite relationship in a WBL approach and facilitating co-creation of learning outcomes and supporting integrating reflective practice (Illeris 2012; Hinnings and Greenwood 2002). Host organisations will also need to recognise student-interns as individuals with abilities to contribute towards organisational goals, and to accordingly support them in being able to engage better with work-dynamics and practices (Lester and Costley 2010). This, we contend, will contribute towards generating opportunities for student-interns developing protean meta-competencies, and addressing issues linked to the perceived graduate ‘skills-gap’ (Kim et al. 2022; Perusso and Wagenaar 2022; Arranz et al. 2022).

A limitation of our study, however, is that it is based on data from student-interns’ reflective logs, meaning themes were chosen by the individual students rather than study design. Future research could adopt a multi-perspectival approach by collecting data from multiple HEIs as well as gathering data from other stakeholders involved in the tripartite relationship. Also, studies exploring interactional mechanisms of university and host-organizations in supporting the creation of individualized WBL curriculum could offer useful insights. Finally, research that examines the development of protean meta-competencies and reflexive engagement with work-dynamics in the case of graduates in their first full-time employment but with no prior internship experience, will also make an important contribution to the literature.

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