



Creating new internship opportunities: engaging employers to see the value in humanities and social sciences

Jonathan Sim describes how he engaged with local employers to open internship opportunities to humanities and social sciences students who would not previously have been considered

Employability Asia Feature article



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Humanities and social science majors are frequently misunderstood, in Singapore as in many other parts of the world. The value of their education is regularly questioned, and many employers are unaware of the value such majors can bring to the table. They prefer to hire graduates with more explicitly "practical" degrees for jobs that humanities and social sciences students could excel in.

As a result, humanities and social sciences students are not typically considered for many organisations and roles, despite offering relevant and useful skills.

So when developing an internship module, I began reaching out to organisations to create internship opportunities in such roles, to boost receptivity to hiring students from these disciplines. This enabled potential employers to better understand how students in subjects they might have previously overlooked can fill gaps in their talent pool.

Compounding the issue is that many humanities and social sciences students are unaware of the diversity of careers available to them and tend to limit themselves to roles stereotypical of their majors. There is a good reason for this. When these students apply for non-stereotypical roles, they are often turned down due to having an "impractical" major.

I regularly hear employers and people in the corporate sector lamenting the lack of creativity and critical-thinking and communication skills in their industries. These key capabilities are needed to challenge assumptions, innovate and improve processes within organisations. Employers' lack of awareness of the value of humanities and social sciences is preventing them considering this potential talent pool.

Starting an internship module

I teach a module on data analysis and philosophical reasoning to hundreds of students each semester. With so many students under my charge, I was inspired by the idea that education is more than just about imparting knowledge. Rather, it is about facilitating growth in one's students by providing them with opportunities for challenge and development.

As a result, I decided it would be worthwhile to experiment with an internship module where I approach employers, explain the value my students can bring to their organisation and ask them to offer temporary roles not typically filled by humanities and social sciences majors. A model designed to be mutually beneficial to both employers and students.

Here are my key lessons in how to do this:

Start by approaching contacts working in human resources (HR) and ask them to link you up with senior management or with department heads of your target companies. I initially spoke to friends in HR and some of them linked me up with HR professionals from other organisations.

Provide reassurance that you will be guiding and mentoring the students throughout the programme. My credentials as a university educator meant employers were generally open to exploring this strategic partnership.

Prepare and present a pitch clearly describing what value and skills your students can bring to the companies where you wish to secure internships. I explained how my students were excellent in data analytics, coding and problem-solving, and their training in humanities and social sciences meant they could bring unique perspectives thanks to creativity and critical thinking. Having worked with the students for one semester already, I could also vouch for their character, including attributes such as work attitude, independence and willingness to learn.

Discuss the job scope and be honest and realistic about what your students can and cannot do. I helped advise the hiring managers on my students' capabilities, based on what I had taught them, and sometimes this meant suggesting new items in the job scope that the organisation may not have considered.

Invite students to apply for the roles available by submitting their CVs, then interview shortlisted candidates. I found interviews useful to get a better understanding of what students wanted to do and what they hoped to achieve during the internship. The application process also provided an opportunity to work with students to improve their CVs and interview skills before they spoke to employers.

Try to match students with internship roles that will best suit their personality, skills and career aspirations.

During the internships, check in on students regularly and ask them to share any challenges, so you can help them troubleshoot any issues. My role was more like an adviser pointing them to resources or giving life advice on how to handle novel social or professional situations.

Ask the students to write reflections centred on how their training in humanities and social sciences can be applied to the work they do as an intern. This helped me gauge the extent of their learning but also nudged students towards deeper reflection on their discipline to see its value and relevance in the work they did. It was very eye-opening to see concrete examples of how students found connections and applications between their studies and their work.

Benefits to organisations and students

These collaborations have proven mutually beneficial. They allow participating organisations to develop strategic partnerships with the university, helping employer branding and making it easier for them to attract talent.

At the same time, the student interns become living proof to employers that their major makes them as good as, if not better than, some students from more "practical" disciplines. The internships help inform humanities and social sciences students that they can take on roles they never thought were open to them.

We have completed one round of internships with organisations such as Henkel, a German multinational chemical and consumer goods company, and Azendian, a local AI data analytics start-up.

Students were pleased with the chance to take up roles they would not have ordinarily pursued, or been given a chance to try, in areas such as supply chain and logistics management, database management and data analytics for marketing. The internships provided profound insights on how they can apply the skills from their majors in ways that allow them to craft a niche in such roles.

The first round of placements seems to have persuaded employers to be more receptive when it comes to hiring humanities and social sciences students, as they have asked for more interns in subsequent iterations.

This is just the beginning, and there is a lot more that we can achieve in our capacity as university faculty by engaging with local organisations and employers. We can work to create more internship opportunities and help employers better understand the capabilities of our students across multiple disciplines here in Singapore and further afield.

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