



International students' access to internships: Using semantic waves to address application requirements

Key Words

Work-integrated learning; international students; diversity; inclusion; semantic waves; LCT

Abstract

Internships are a key mechanism for enhancing employability and developing global citizenship (Smith & Worsfold, 2015, Rawlings-Sanaei, 2017). Although work-integrated learning is of increasing importance to international students (Blackmore et al. 2014) and international education is of significant economic, cultural and social value to Australian universities, international students are generally underrepresented in work-integrated learning (McCrae & Gribble, 2016; Jackson, 2017). In turn, limited access to relevant work experience and internships has a direct impact on international students' employment outcomes (Arkoudis et al. 2009), and international students may face difficulties in gaining professional experience in Australia after graduation (Yates & Wahid, 2013). Access to internship opportunities for international students can only be effectively addressed through a network of targeted strategies that involve a range of stakeholders including students, staff and partners. In this paper we focus on student preparedness for internships, recognising that this is only one dimension of a complex set of issues and possible strategies to address these. While foundation courses, pathway programs and academic literacy units target non-English background students' English language proficiency, international students are likely to face linguistic penalties (Roberts, 2012) when attempting to manage the discourse requirements of internship applications. In particular, applicants in this context are required to address selection criteria with reference to their generic or employability skills, assuming universal and shared knowledge of how these are discursively represented in English in order to match the 'process and rhetoric of institutional selection' (Roberts, 2012; Yates, 2008). We report on a recent study of international students' access to and preparedness for internships at an Australian university that included a content analysis of 30 international students' unsuccessful internship applications within the business faculty. Using methodological tools from Legitimation Code Theory, which allow for conceptualisation of the organising principles of knowledge practices and examination of their effects (Maton, 2014a, 2014b), analysis revealed wide variation in applicants' use of organizational and professional discourses in resumes and cover letters. We found some applications to be too general, lacking reference to activities and achievements that were relevant to selection criteria, and others to be too abstract, with broad references to abstract organisational themes and a lack of concrete examples drawn from the applicants' own experience. These differences are described with reference to semantic waves (Maton, 2014) that chart movement between context-dependent (high semantic gravity, low semantic density) and context-independent, (low semantic gravity or more condensed meanings). Some applications demonstrated a high level of English language proficiency, yet did not meet discourse requirements for internship applications, highlighting the need to develop international students' professional communication skills, including intercultural competence as well as English language proficiency (Murray, 2010). Drawing on our analysis, we outline practical recommendations for internship preparation, consistent with IEAA's recommendation (Gribble, 2015) that universities create targeted employability strategies that support international students to overcome inherent disadvantages in accessing work-integrated learning.



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