What? and How? Ways to improve internships in higher education institutions

Kätlin Vanari[a1], Kaire Povilaitis[a]

[a]*School of Educational Sciences, Tallinn University*

Summary

Societal changes have forced universities to create contacts within workplaces and take greater responsibility for the employability of graduates. The employability rate is one of the key performance indicators for the evaluation and ranking of universities, and they have invested considerable resources to create innovative formats for collaboration with employers. Workplace learning, practice-based education and internships have become important topics in discussions about teaching and learning in universities. However, curriculum development and curriculum leadership have remained secondary. The management and leadership in universities have focused mostly on excellence in research, and the pedagogical dimension has been ignored (Elo & Uljens, 2023; Ersozlu & Saklan, 2016; Shaked, 2020). In Estonia, teaching and learning are acknowledged strategically, but it has been noted that collaboration for curriculum development is complicated, and the programme leaders act in isolation (Kumpas-Lenk et al., 2022; Vanari, in press). So far the studies about internships in Estonian higher education institutions have explored the stakeholders' views on practical arrangements (Ernst and Young, 2017; Kaseorg, 2015).

In this article, curriculum leadership is conceptualised as a combination of the scholarship of curriculum practice (Burt & Hubball, 2014; Hubball et al., 2013) and instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2011; Shaked, 2020). It is essential to understand the curriculum in a holistic way, and the scholarship of curriculum practice ensures an institutional and strategic view of decisions about the curriculum, taking into account its context, planning, implementation and evaluation (Burt & Hubball, 2014; Hubball et al., 2013). The need and opportunities to improve internships emerge and give direction to changes within the curriculum. To lead the changes, programme leaders take on the role of instructional leaders who act in three dimensions: creating the vision for learning, managing the instructional programme and developing a positive learning climate (Hallinger, 2011; Shaked, 2020). These principles provide the framework for improving the internships (Figure 1).

---

1   School of Educational Sciences, Tallinn University, Uus-Sadama 5, Tallinn, katlin.vanari@tlu.ee.
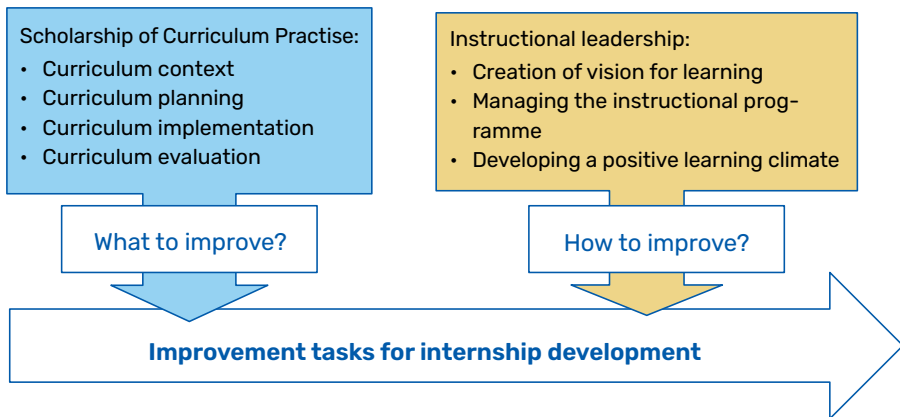
Figure 1. The model for improvement of internships in curriculum leadership (by authors).

The aim of this study is to explore the perceptions of internship developers on what needs improvement based on the inquiry of curriculum practice, what the planned tasks for improvement are and how instructional leadership is enacted. The following research questions were posed:

1) What are the improvement needs of internships based on the inquiry of curriculum practice?

2) How instructional leadership is to be enacted during the planning of the improvement of internships,

3) What are the improvement tasks for curriculum development planned by internship developers?

We conducted documentary research using qualitative content analysis. Through systematic procedure, we could evaluate the documents to interpret and create empirical data about the ideas and intentions of the document authors (Bowen, 2009). The sample consisted of 51 persons from nine Estonian higher education institutions; all the participants had taken part in the professional development courses during the 2021/22 and 2022/23 study years. Data were collected from the assignments conducted during the course. These assignments asked for plans on how to improve the internships, and it was compiled through a 4-step process, starting with a situation analysis of the current internship and a mini-inquiry plan, followed by reporting about the results of the mini-inquiry and finally planning the action plan for improvements. The assignments were analysed by two authors in the following phases: initial reading and marking relevant parts, initial thematic coding, inductive and deductive coding and double-coding. For deductive coding, we used categories

from Hubball et al. (2013) for scholarship of curriculum practice and Shaked (2020) for dimensions of instructional leadership.

The results revealed that internship developers conducted different mini-inquires about curriculum practice, exploring the context, planning, implementing and evaluating the curriculum. It is notable that they mostly inquired about the curriculum implementation from the perspective of students, employers and the university. Therefore, we can conclude that the potential for curriculum development is not used, and inquiry about the context of the curriculum is not the source for curriculum development. This raises a question for further research – what kind of external and internal factors are initiating the discussions in the curriculum team about the vision and objectives of the curriculum?

The improvement plans for internships analysed in the current study referred to the tasks arising from the curriculum, practical arrangements in the university and collaboration with stakeholders. The current study agrees with previous research (Kaseorg, 2015) that the need for improvement is mostly rooted in the problems of communication with employers. However, the planned improvements are not aiming to widen and sustain the network of employers, and we can assume, based on Vanari (in press), that it is due to the management and organisational structure, which is not empowering for the programme leaders.

The changes planned by the internship developers often focus on curriculum planning and increasing the alignment of learning outcomes and the learning process during the internship. Outcome-based education has been widely disputed by educational theorists, and Hadjianastasis (2017) and Albashiry et al. (2016) find that learning outcomes benefit student learning if the curriculum leaders and developers understand the theoretical ideas behind them. The professional development courses for academics could contribute to the evidence-based knowledge of curriculum leaders as well as facilitate co-creation in curriculum design.

A limitation of the present study is the specificity of the research method used, where the documents analysed characterise the activities planned for internship development in the context of a professional development course. The purpose and the context in which the document was produced have a significant influence on the content of the document (Bowen, 2009). Plans produced as part of the course may not necessarily characterise actual internship development in higher education institutions. In conclusion, our study contributes to the discussion about curriculum leadership in higher education institutions and elaborates on trends in internship improvement.