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Screening talent has mutual benefits



KEN MANN

A CONVERSATION with Linda Murdoch, deputy director of the University of Glasgow's busy careers service, put paid to more than a few myths about recent student internship experiences.

We were chatting about a new generation programme to be launched next week, of which more in a moment. But it was Murdoch's brand of matter of fact dismissal of some commonly held views that refreshed and surprised me.

First up – recession. It decimated the number of internships available – they virtually disappeared, didn't they? “No, they didn't,” she interrupts. “In 2009 we had quite a large growth in our internship programme. In general I think that's because companies recognised things were going to get better – so they wanted to keep their hand in in offering students good experience in the workplace. And of course, we made an extra special effort.”

Okay. So, in the case of less scrupulous smaller employers it could be argued that it's a great way of getting knowledgeable people in the door on the cheap?

“We vet the companies to make

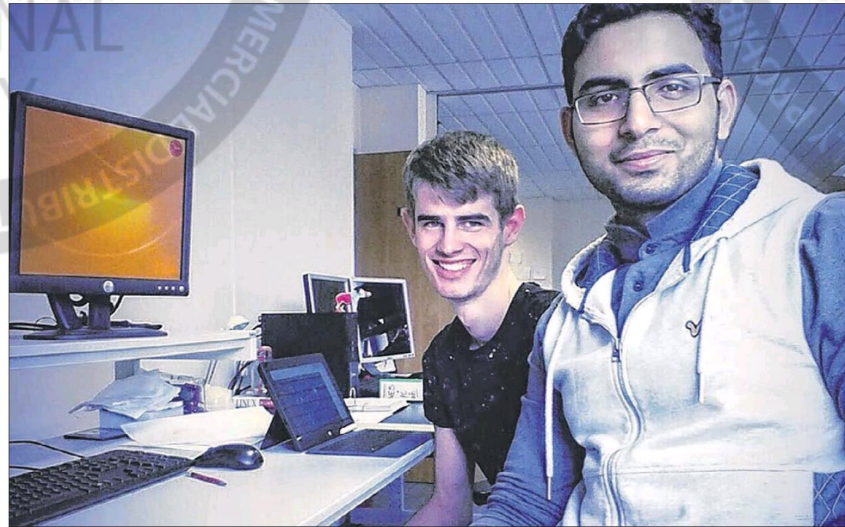
sure what they are going to offer is beneficial,” Murdoch retorts. “We advertise paid internships – unless it is the voluntary sector, we won't have internships that are unpaid. And we encourage the rate for the job.”

Across all sectors, 360 students last year found places – probably enough from which to draw robust conclusions. Dubbed Club 21, the University's current facilitator role started 15 years ago, though next week it will undergo a re-brand and partial metamorphosis to become **Internship Hub**.

Offering businesses a more tailored and extensive service in support of their recruitment efforts, Internship Hub is designed to give greater networking opportunities and links on campus. From Thursday – launch day – that should translate to an increase in the number and diversity of opportunities for undergraduates who, typically, take up the option in their third year of an honours degree.

Club 21 has certainly offered useful leverage. Started with just 13 companies and a focus on Financial Services, as it passes on the baton more than 150 employers are now in regular contact. The new Hub is configured to better reflect increasing scale and anticipates the mood for more detailed student/employer interfaces.

Murdoch allowed me access to some very positive case study material, gleaned from its back-check auditing this year. Selective, you say? Maybe – but that's academic anyway, remembering that none of the participants needs to apply a gloss. A core platform of repeat relationships over



NET GAIN: Computer science students Ben Jackson and Hamza Malik enjoyed fruitful internships with online booking business Freetobook.

time – University to employer and vice versa – seems to suggest a reliable framework.

Take Iain Stewart, a director of Freetobook, an innovative online booking engine for independent hospitality providers. The business took on 20 year old Ben Jackson and Hamza Malik (22), both computer science scholars, for three months over the summer.

“They were working on our big new sales portal,” Stewart explains. His brother Craig, a

graduate of the University, started the business from his bedroom in 1998.

“They came in with fresh ideas, and were bang up-to-date with the latest technologies. They spent the first four to six weeks just doing a lot of research and analysis on how we are scoping it out and building it. They were given lots of small problems to go away and understand and then they had to come back with options. They were mainly using

their computing skills, but also quite a lot of business. They are totally digitally native.”

“I have learnt absolutely loads in terms of programming – a lot of languages they have used that I was not very familiar with,” says Jackson. “Employability? Very possibly, yes, it will make me more employable: 80 per cent of my year will do an internship but I will have three months more experience.”

Malik agrees: “I never imag-

ined I would learn so much,” he adds. “They have given us a really open space to develop new technology. We learned so many languages and learned most of the things that will be helpful in third year.”

There are differences in the way smaller businesses approach intern recruitment, compared to larger brethren, much of it down to the absence of a full in-house professional HR resource. Murdoch is at pains to point out

that her unit is happy to offer its experience in such circumstances.

Neil Lapping, owner of Macs Adventure – a specialist in self-guided walking and cycling holidays at destinations across the world – apparently sees the benefit.

“This year I decided to take a much more structured look at it (internships), which is why I got in touch with Club 21,” he indicates. “What struck me was that



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when planning, you are actually speaking to someone who has a very clear idea of what you are looking to get out of it.

“You are getting a really good quality of applicant but as a business you are answerable to the University. It takes the hassle out of advertising a post, especially if you don't have a large HR resource.”

In many ways modern Scottish university careers services add demonstrable value to the purpose of higher education.

“You wouldn't be able to advise a student unless you really understood the labour market,” Murdoch insists. “That's the way it should be – students come to university expecting that their degree will enhance their career prospects.”