Political internship programme with the Scottish Parliament

With the return of a Scottish Parliament in 1999, the opportunity presented itself to organise an internship programme where students, after a tuition period at the Institute of Governance, would then work with an MSP in a two month internship structured around a research project.

**School:** Social & Political Science

**Target Audience:**Third Year Undergraduate Visiting Politics Students

**Staff Involved:** Institute of Governance Co-Director, Academic Coordinator, and Administrative Secretary

**Dates/timings:** Annually since 1999

Key features

With the return of a Scottish Parliament in 1999, the opportunity presented itself to organise an internship programme where students, after a tuition period at the Institute of Governance, would then work with an MSP in a two month internship structured around a research project. This provides students valuable political work experience, fully immersed within the Scottish political process and supported by preparatory class to accelerate student integration and effectiveness. In addition, this experience both draws on and further develops students’ abilities in a range of key areas.

Planning

Before the programme could be installed, meetings with the Presiding Officer and party leaders at Holyrood took place to ensure the cooperation of the Scottish Parliament.

Annually, students are matched with an MSP on the basis of political and research interests, and then receive support from the Institute of Governance’s administrative secretary as necessary.

Activity

The programme started in September 1999, with just two students; the following year the uptake rose to 8 and 10 students for the spring and autumn legs of the internship, respectively; and as from 2001 the target of c.20 students per semester has been achieved. Approximately one third of these are recruited through Arcadia, one third through Butler universities, and one third as ‘independents’. Since 2010, an additional, slightly shorter, summer programme has been added.

Most of the students – over 400 so far – have come through American universities (not all of them American), but there have also been students from Australia, Canada, Germany and Holland.

Having taken advice from existing internship schemes elsewhere, an emphasis was laid on the research component to avoid mere ‘shadowing’. The research project is agreed between the student, the MSP and the Academic Coordinator/Director of Studies.

Resources

The interns have a base at the Institute of Governance’s Chisholm House, and ongoing support is provided by the Institute’s administrative secretary as necessary. During their internship, contact is maintained with the students via emails from the Institute regarding relevant events, examinations, deadlines etc.

Evaluation

The programme has been a huge success with the Parliament – many more MSPs are now taking interns than at the beginning, as they have realised that the students are committed, capable and motivated, and that their classes at the Institute of Governance provide them with the necessary know-how to ease their start and increase their effectiveness at the Parliament.

Feedback from the students has been exceptionally positive. When comparing their internship with other internship experiences they highlight the degree of responsibility conferred on them, the hands-on experience of full immersion in the Scottish political process, the close working relationship with an MSP and his/her team, and the combination of working in the Parliament building and gaining insight into constituency work.

Some interns have returned to Scotland to study for a postgraduate degree, some have returned to the Parliament for paid employment. Back in America, most interns would go on to graduate school, in most cases to Law School. From feedback we have received, we know that interns have gone on to work in administration and financial institutions, have taken up positions working for Congressmen and Senators.

The internship programme has built up a good reputation, and a recommendation letter from an MSP does carry some clout when it comes to furthering the career of an ex-intern.

Advice

Key to the success of the programme is keeping it manageable. Furthermore, tailor-made classroom teaching in preparation to entering Parliament, and the best possible match between MSP and student interests, both in a political sense and as to the research project, are also important factors for the success of the scheme.

Key contacts

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<http://www.ed.ac.uk/employability/staff-information/how-employability-addressed/good-practice/hss/internship>