

Reading Internship Scheme 2023/24

An evaluation

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Executive Summary

The Reading Internship Scheme (RIS) offers University of Reading undergraduate students the opportunity to undertake paid internships with charities, businesses, and internal University of Reading departments.

The evaluation

The evaluation methodology was Type 2, as there was a comparison of pre-post scores, and a comparison of graduate outcomes for RIS participants compared to those who did not participate.

Main findings

The results showed significant increases in post-RIS scores compared to pre-RIS scores for the areas of:

1. Self-reported work experience ($d = 0.52$)
2. Self-reported confidence ($d = 0.37$), though for the IMDQ1&2 subset this was not significant
3. Self-reported professional network development ($d = 0.55$)

Conclusions/recommendations

The results tentatively suggest that RIS has a significant, positive impact on self-reported work experience, confidence and professional network development. Based on a small sub-sample of IMDQ1&2 students, there was not a significant increase in confidence for this group; this will be monitored using combined data from several years to more robustly ascertain any effect.

Introduction

Report caveats

This report is part of the first cycle of more robust evaluation in line with our new Access and Participation Plan. Therefore, we acknowledge that the evaluation still has limitations and we do not intend to over-claim the strength of any conclusions.

In particular, it is noted that this evaluation is based primarily on self-reported data, which can be impacted by many factors. There were practical challenges to data collection, and it is acknowledged that the limited sample size of pre- and post-intervention data reduces the robustness of claims about the programme's effectiveness beyond immediate reactions. Nevertheless, the data here still provide valuable insights into engagement and the immediate perceived benefits of the programme. Future evaluations will aim to strengthen data collection, ensuring a more robust set of pre- and post-intervention measures, and include comparison groups where possible. Long-term data will also become available.

Rationale

There is a gap in graduate outcomes for IMDQ1 and 2 students compared to IMDQ 3, 4 & 5 students (IMD = indices of multiple deprivation, with 1 being the most deprived and 5 being the least). There is some [evidence](#) that work experience can help with securing good graduate outcomes, however a lot of extracurricular work experience is unpaid, which many students are unable to undertake due to the financial burdens. The Reading Internship Scheme (RIS) uses its funds to contribute towards interns' salaries, meaning students are able to undertake paid, meaningful work experiences. In this way, RIS aims to contribute to reducing progression gaps between IMDQ1&2 students and other students.

Intervention

The Reading Internship Scheme (RIS) provides internship opportunities for all students, with small and medium enterprises (SME) and charities. Students can apply for any internship via a 2-question name-blind application form, which has replaced the CV & covering letter. This new system is designed to level the playing field as it is generally easier for students from IMDQ 3,4&5 to have fuller, more varied CVs, and a lack of name prevents any associated biases entering the selection process. This application is received initially by the RIS Manager rather than going directly to the hiring manager, so there is improved monitoring of the application process.

Internships are offered in person and remotely. There has also been a shift to offering part-time, term-time internships, as well as the traditional full-time summer internships. This has opened the opportunities up to a wider group of students, for example those who are not going to be in Reading in the summer, or who need a source of term-time

income. A £100 Expense Bursary available to home students with at least one WP marker to support them with expenses. This bursary is automatic, so students do not have to apply, which aims to support time-bound students as it removes the barrier of having to go through a lengthy application process. SMEs and charities are able to recruit interns to advance their operations, and benefit their local community.

University of Reading students are able to practice their application and selection techniques amongst a wide range of opportunities. Furthermore, they gain valuable work experience, confidence and increase their network of professional contacts.

Context

This evaluation covers the academic year 2023/24. Participants were those undertaking RIS internships, both full time and part time. Internships took place both in-person and remotely, depending on the specific internship.

Link to Access & Participation Plan (APP)

This activity contributes to one of the APP aims (Objective 5), to close the unexplained gaps in progression that correlate with disadvantaged backgrounds.

Methodology

Research questions

The research questions:

1. Does participation in Reading Internship Scheme increase self-reported work experience?
2. Does participation in Reading Internship Scheme increase self-reported confidence?
3. Does participation in Reading Internship Scheme increase self-reported professional network development?
 4. Does taking part in Reading Internship Scheme improve positive Graduate Outcomes, compared to those who did not take part? (note this data is not yet available and will be included in a future evaluation report)

The focus here is IMD Q1 & Q2 students but will include the whole student population.

Participants

There were 135 students that completed a RIS internship in the academic year 2023/24. Of these students, 22.6% were from IMDQ1 and Q2 – this is slightly below the undergraduate proportion of 25%. Our aim is to increase the proportion taking part in RIS to be at least in line with the Our undergraduate proportion.

The students applied to take part in RIS internships – opportunities were advertised to all undergraduate students through our jobs board and promoted further via social media and a range of other channels.

Participants included in this report are those that successfully completed an internship **and** completed both the Reading Internship Scheme ‘Before’ and ‘After’ surveys. Overall, this is 71 participants out of the 135.

Data collection

Surveys

Students were sent a survey before completing their RIS internship (the ‘Before’ Survey, see Appendix 1) and were then sent the same survey after they finished the internship (the ‘After’ Survey, see Appendix 2). The questions were asked on a 5-point Likert scale, 1 being ‘Strongly disagree’ to 5 being ‘Strongly agree’.

The concepts measured were:

Concept	Items
Self-reported work experience	<i>I have good exposure to graduate level work</i>
Self-reported confidence	<i>I am confident in my capacity to realise my graduate goals</i> <i>I have or can develop skills to succeed in the job or course I am aiming for in future</i>
Self-reported professional networks	<i>I have contacts who can help me reach my future goals</i>

These questions were taken from the NERUPI question bank.

Graduate destinations

Graduate destinations are measured by the Graduate Outcomes Survey, which is sent to students 15 months after graduation. This is not currently available for the 2023/2024 RIS cohort – we will be able to start collecting this data once the 2023/2024 RIS interns finish their course (and receive the survey 15 months later). Note this will not be available for all 71 participants immediately as some students will finish their course later than others (i.e. for Part 1 students who took part in 2023/2024 we would get Graduate Outcomes in 2028 whereas a Final Year student who took part in the 2023/2024 RIS would be received in June 2026).

We will follow the [Office for Students guidance](#) on the categorisation of positive destinations which is calculated using several questions from the Graduate Outcomes Survey.

Graduates will be linked to their RIS participation via their student number.

Ethics and Data Security

All participants were over 18 and were therefore able to give consent to take part in the research. Participants were informed that by completing the survey they consented for their data to be used for evaluation purposes and published in a report externally in an anonymised form.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were generated for each outcome measure.

Surveys

Survey results were analysed using Paired T tests, to ascertain whether average pre-activity scores differed significantly from post-activity scores. This was conducted for a total of 4 questions which have been combined into three concepts as defined in the data collection portion of this report. Effect sizes were also calculated. This analysis was also conducted for the sub-sample of IMDQ1 and Q2 students.

Graduate destinations

We have not been able to do this analysis as the data is only collected 15 months after the end of their course. However, once we have the data we will be able to compare the proportion of RIS students reporting a 'positive' graduate destination with the proportion of the non-RIS comparator group reporting a 'positive' graduate destination. Ideally the non-RIS comparator group will be matched on key demographics to control for the impact of this.

Type of evaluation

This evaluation was conducted to Type 2, according to the Office for Students' Standard of Evidence classification. The intermediate outcomes were measured pre- and post-activity, with the same participants.

The long-term outcome will be measured and analysed against a comparator group comprising similar students who did not complete a RIS internship. We will only be able to do this once the Graduate Outcomes survey is sent out – this is sent to students 15 months after they graduate so we do not yet have any data for the 2023/2024 RIS interns.

Limitations

The nature of the evaluation type means that causal inferences cannot be made from any results – there may have been other factors influencing the students. As with many evaluations of activities in the complex landscape of higher education, it can be challenging to link activities directly to causes.

Some students who completed RIS did not complete both surveys, meaning some potential data was lost.

As with all self-reported data, there is the risk that participants report what they think the researchers want to know, rather than how they really feel. Additionally, there was no follow-up, so we cannot be sure that positive effects continued after RIS, although ideally the longer term Graduate Outcomes data will illuminate this.

Results

The mean scores, statistical significance test and effect sizes are shown below.

The below table analyses the before and after internship survey results from all UK-domiciled students who are paying home fees and participated in RIS. 61 participants.

Concept	'Before' Mean (SD)	'After' Mean (SD)	Statistical test	Effect size
Self-reported work experience	3.39 (1.02)	3.92 (0.79)	t (61) = -3.39, p<.001 **	d = 0.52
Self-reported confidence	4.19 (0.63)	4.42 (0.60)	t (61) = -2.32, p=.024 *	d = 0.37
Self-reported professional networks	3.27 (1.03)	3.84 (0.94)	t (61) = -4.51, p<.001 **	d = 0.55

* = significance at 0.05, ** = significance at 0.001

The table shows that mean responses were significantly higher for each item in the 'After' survey than the 'Before' survey. The results are all statistically significant at the 5% level. Two of the effect sizes are, on the whole, at least moderate (0.5 and above), with one small effect size (0.37). Together, this suggests that RIS is having a significant impact on each of these factors, although the association is not causal.

The survey responses were also specifically calculated for IMDQ1&2, although the sample size is much smaller here (n = 15):

Concept	'Before' Mean (SD)	'After' Mean (SD)	Statistical test	Effect size
Self-reported work experience	3.13 (1.20)	3.93 (0.68)	t (14) = -2.04, p=.06	d = 0.66

Concept	'Before' Mean (SD)	'After' Mean (SD)	Statistical test	Effect size
Self-reported confidence	4.33 (0.47)	4.3 (0.77)	t (14) = 0.17, p= 0.87	d = -0.07
Self-reported professional networks	2.87 (1.09)	3.47 (0.96)	t (14) = -1.72, p=.11	d = 0.55

* = significance at 0.05, ** = significance at 0.001

The table shows that mean responses were not significantly higher in the 'After' survey than the 'Before' survey for any of the concepts. However, concept 1 (self-reported work experience) was marginally significant. This suggests at first glance that IMDQ1&2 students do not increase in self-reported work experience, confidence and professional networks after their internships the same way that the student sample as a whole does.

However, it is important to note that the sample size reduces to only 15 for the IMDQ1&2 analysis so we cannot draw strong conclusions from this result. In future years we will do some combined analysis on this to create larger sample sizes. This will provide some particular clarity on the 'work experience' concept, which was approaching significance. It is also worth noting that IMDQ1&2 students report higher confidence levels in the Before Survey than the non-IMD students:

GROUP	BEFORE SURVEY RESULT FOR CONFIDENCE (MEAN)	AFTER SURVEY RESULT FOR CONFIDENCE (MEAN)
IMDQ1&2 (14)	4.33	4.3
Non-IMDQ1/2 (47)	4.13	4.46

This may affect the data and result in 'decreased' confidence as students may report high confidence levels before an internships but after completion realise that they were not as confident as they believed they were. We find this to be a common occurrence in careers where students report high confidence levels before undertaking an internship or placement and then the reality of the experience shows they were less confident than they originally thought.

Other survey question analysis

As part of the After Survey, we also ask students the following questions:

1. Overall, did you enjoy your internship? (Pick one that applies: Yes, No, Unsure)

2. Did your employer treat you well? (Pick one that applies: Yes, No, Unsure)
3. Would you recommend the Reading Internship Scheme to other students? (Pick one that applies: Yes, No, Unsure)
4. Have your career aspirations changed as a result of your RIS internship? (Pick one that applies: Yes, No, Unsure)
5. Do you feel RIS helped you determine what career you'd like to go into after graduating? (Pick one that applies: Yes, No, Unsure)

86 students have overall completed the After Survey (please note: some of these students did not complete the Before Survey which is why they were not included in the previous table analysis). The questions aforementioned are unique to the After Survey which is why they are worth reporting on as they demonstrate further the impact of the scheme:

1. 99% reported that they **enjoyed their internship overall**.
2. 100% reported that their **employers treated them well**.
3. 99% said they would **recommend the Reading Internship Scheme to other students**.
4. 35% of students said their **career aspirations changed as a result of their internship**.
5. 69% said that they feel **RIS helped them determine what career they'd like to go into after graduating**.

We also ask students to provide qualitative feedback on their experience (this is optional so not everyone fills them out). The following questions are 'free box' questions so students can write comments:

- What did you gain from your internship and did you find the experience worthwhile? (free text)
- Is there anything the Reading Internship Scheme could do better? (free text)
- Please provide more information – is there anything you particularly liked or disliked? (free text)

The following themes have emerged from analysing these answers:

Positive overall experience of the scheme:

"The scheme is a really good opportunity for students to access interesting and insightful placements." – Grant Writer & Fundraising Intern

"i loved the whole thing honestly - i was supported by the team and the internship providers and i learnt so much specifically with social media usage." – Social Media Intern

The internship helped me gain experience

"It was a brilliant way to be in the working environment and meet new people who provided me with priceless experience." – Support Worker Intern

“I gained a lot of experience and contacts from the work I've done. It'll be good to add to my CV to show that I've done valuable work. RIS is definitely worthwhile.” – Market Research & Marketing Intern

“I gained a different perspective. Insight to a world that is faintly different to my usual field of work and was pleased to be able to explore not just that line of work but to be able to adapt into a 9-5 office work hour atmosphere; the experience was very worthwhile.” - PR, Influencer, and Social Media Intern

The internship gave me insight into different careers and sectors

“It's changed the course of my career goals completely! This opportunity allowed me to combine two things I never thought would be compatible– my passion for humanitarianism and my strengths in data and design.” - Digital Communications & Database Intern

“This RIS was a different role completely from my career goals, but I enjoyed the opportunity to raise funds for a deserving charity.” – Grant Writer and Fundraising Intern

Conclusions & recommendations

Conclusions

The Reading Internship Scheme (RIS) appears to have a significant, positive impact on self-reported work experience, confidence and professional contacts for all students, including UK-domiciled home fees paying students. The impact on does not appear to be significant for the IMDQ1&2 sub-sample of students however due to the small sample size it is difficult to draw conclusions from this. In future years, we will conduct combined analysis in order to increase the sample size and understand the impact of RIS on IMDQ1&2 students better.

Recommendations

The RIS is running successfully, with evidence suggesting it is contributing to the overall intervention strategy to remove barriers and reduce progression gaps for disadvantaged students. Therefore, this evaluation provides good evidence to support the continuation of the programme, with potential expansion to benefit even more students from IMDQ1 and Q2.

For future evaluations, we will be looking to use the Careers Registration Data to act as a pre-post for those who do not do both surveys (because they will answer questions at the start and end of the academic year).

We will also be changing the way we send the surveys to students – in the 2023/2024 academic year, students completed the surveys via a Pathway on MyJobsOnline. This had some unforeseen issues as students that graduate would drop off of this Pathway so no longer able to complete the surveys. In the 2024/2025

academic year, the surveys will be via Microsoft Forms to allow all students to be able to fill them out.

We are continually working to improve the scheme and increase the number of students engaging with the Reading Internship Scheme including IMDQ1/2 students. We have, to date, altered the scheme greatly in order to better support students from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as introducing anonymised applications and the RIS expense bursary, so we will continue doing this.

We are also introducing weekly drop-in sessions in the Library Café for any RIS related queries students may have – we wanted to hold these in a safe space that students know as some students may be reluctant to make an appointment or come to the Careers Centre but more likely to come to the library. These sessions are run by our Projects Assistant who is also a current Part 2 student – this works well as some students reported to feel put off or nervous coming to a session but once they found out it was run by another student they were more relaxed. So far 3 sessions were held and on average we have 3 students per session. We will continue running and promoting these.

We are also considering holding an Application Workshop in Semester 2 focusing on RIS applications specifically. This will be an interactive workshop where students will be asked to imagine they are RIS employers – they'll receive 3-5 applications which they will need to look through and shortlist 2 for interviews. We hope this will help students understand what employers look for in applications when shortlisting and refer it back to their own applications. This session will be open to all but heavily promoted to: students who have applied to multiple RIS internships and were rejected after application, and IMDQ1&2 students.

We can see that the proportion of students that apply from IMDQ1&2 is much higher than the proportion that are placed (31.2% of applicants are from IMD Q1&2 compared to the 22.6% of students that are placed). We can also see that IMD students are being shortlisted for interview (31.6% of those shortlisted from IMD Q1&2) but are not being offered the roles. This implies that IMDQ1&2 students are keen to gain experience through internships and actively applying but they are not progressing past the application or interview stage. For this reason, we have introduced the drop ins and application sessions as mentioned above in order to support the IMDQ1&2 students more.

When available, data on Graduate Outcomes will be analysed to determine whether these positive impacts carry graduates forward into positive outcomes.

References

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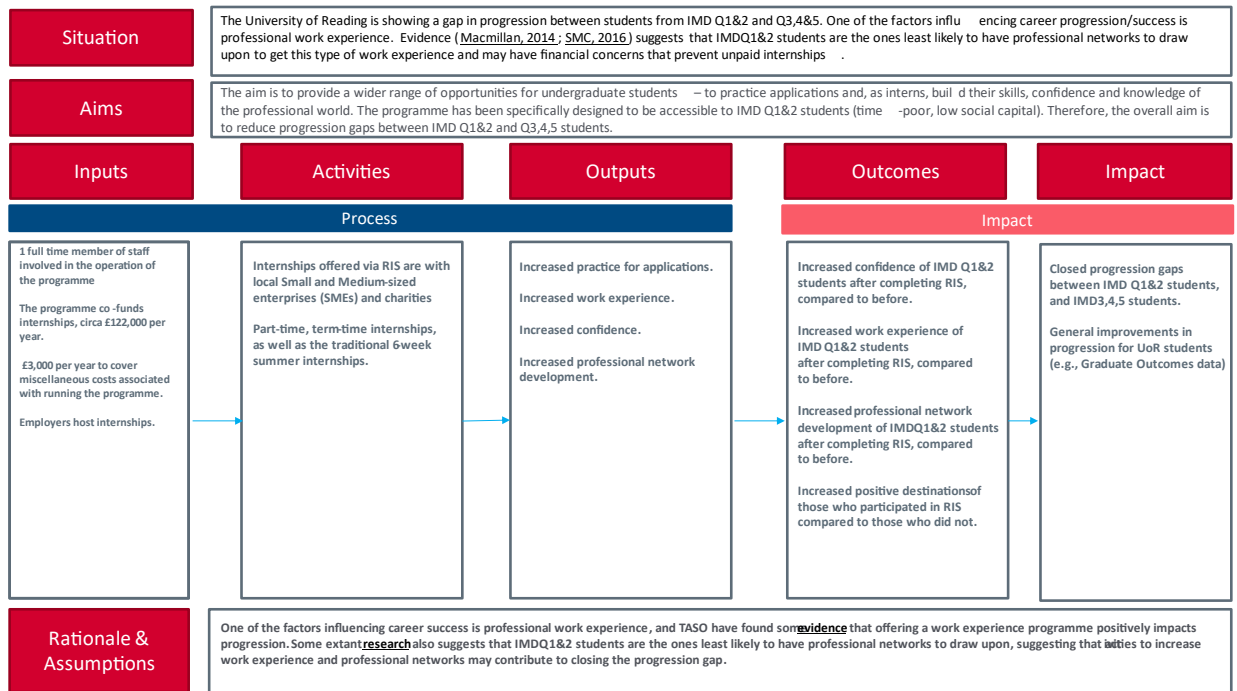
Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the students who completed the surveys and took part in this research. We would also like to thank the employers who offered RIS internships.

Notes

This report has been reviewed by members of the Access and Participation Evaluation Subcommittee (APES), with particular support from Lydia Fletcher and Louise Thomas-Burt on data analysis in an earlier version.

Appendix A – Theory of Change



Appendix B – Surveys

1. Before Survey

- How did you hear about the internship you applied for? (multiple choice – pick one that applies)
 - Browsing on MJO
 - Email
 - RIS Webpages on University website
 - Careers/ Placement Appointments
 - LinkedIn
 - Other (please specify below)

If 'Other' please specify (free type box):

- What motivated you to apply for an internship? (multiple choice- tick all that apply)
 - I want to gain experience to enhance my CV
 - I want to explore my options and see what's out there
 - I want to gain/develop my transferrable skills

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- I want to gain insight into a sector/ role
- I want to earn some money
- Other (please specify)

If 'Other' please specify (free type box):

3. Have you had any previous work experience before this internship? (pick one that applies)
- Yes
 - No
 - Unsure

4. On a scale of 1-5 (1 being strongly agree and 5 being strongly disagree), please rank yourself on the below:

I have good exposure to graduate level work

I am confident in my capacity to realise my graduate goals

I have or can develop skills to succeed in the job or course I am aiming for in future

I have contacts who can help me reach my future goals

5. Reflecting on the application process, please rank the following on a scale of 1-5 (1 being strongly agree and 5 being strongly disagree):

Overall, I really liked the application process for RIS (1 strongly agree and 5 strongly disagree)

I like the anonymous application forms

I found the prompts on the application forms helpful

I found the application process easy and straightforward

I feel there was enough support available to help me with my application

2. After Survey

Congratulations on completing your internship through the Reading Internship Scheme! We hope to find out through this final survey how your experience has been.

This is a very short 'after' survey that we send out to students who are taking part in an internship on the scheme, which should only take you a few minutes. It helps us

understand how the programme helps students and also ways that you feel we can improve the programme.

If you have any questions or further comments, please contact me directly on ris@reading.ac.uk.

For further information about the data we are collecting, please consult the Student Privacy Notice:

https://www.reading.ac.uk/web/files/imps/Student_Privacy_Notice_May_18.pdf

- Overall, did you enjoy your internship? (pick one that applies)
 - Yes
 - No
 - Unsure
- Did your employer treat you well? (pick one that applies)
 - Yes
 - No
 - Unsure
- Was your internship full-time or part-time? (pick one that applies)
 - Full-time
 - Part-time
 - Mix
- Do you feel that the length of your internship was sufficient?
 - Yes, the length was just right
 - No – I wish it was longer
 - No – I wish it was shorter
- Before undertaking an internship, did you have any previous work experience? (pick all that apply)
 - I had no previous experience – this internship was my first job!
 - Yes – I had part-time jobs before
 - Yes – I've done other internships before
 - Yes – I've done a placement year
 - Yes – I worked full-time before
 - Yes – I volunteered before
 - Unsure

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- Have your career aspirations changed as a result of your RIS internship?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Unsure
- Do you feel RIS helped you determine what career you'd like to go into after graduating?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Unsure
- On a scale of 1-5 (1 being strongly agree and 5 being strongly disagree), please rank yourself on the below:

I have good exposure to graduate level work

I am confident in my capacity to realise my graduate goals

I have or can develop skills to succeed in the job or course I am aiming for in future

I have contacts who can help me reach my future goals

- What did you gain from your internship and did you find the experience worthwhile? (free text)
- Is there anything the Reading Internship Scheme could do better? (free text)
- Would you recommend the Reading Internship Scheme to other students?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Unsure
- Please provide more information – is there anything you particularly liked or disliked?
- Would you be happy for us to use one or more of your comments as part of our marketing and promotion for the Reading Internship Scheme 2024-25? (e.g. "A student intern from 2024 commented, 'RIS was a really valuable experience'). Your answers would be anonymised.
 - Yes
 - No