

Beyond the Classroom: Understanding the True Purpose of Internships



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GUWAHATI, July 4, 2026 — Recently, while interacting with a group of undergraduates preparing for their upcoming internships, I asked a question that appeared ordinary.

"Why do you think your university is sending you for an internship?" The answers came quickly: "To get a certificate," "To complete the course," "To gain experience "and" It will help us get a job."

None of these answers were entirely wrong. Yet none of them reflected the real purpose of an internship.

That conversation stayed with me. It made me wonder whether students alone misunderstand internships or whether many of us—teachers, colleges, universities and even host organisations—have gradually forgotten why internships became an important part of higher education.

The University Grants Commission (UGC), following the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, introduced internship guidelines with a clear objective. An internship was never intended to be another academic formality. It was designed to connect classroom learning with the realities of society, workplaces and professional life. The guidelines speak about mentorship, workplace learning, research aptitude, ethical values, teamwork, problem-solving, entrepreneurship and citizenship. They repeatedly emphasise that students should engage in real work situations under proper guidance and supervision.

In reality, however, we appear to be moving in a different direction. The idea of learning through experience is much older than universities themselves. For centuries, knowledge passed from one generation to another through practice. Farmers learned by working alongside experienced farmers. Artisans perfected their craft under master craftsmen. Traditional healers, musicians and boat builders all learned through observation, participation and responsibility. Even the ancient Indian guru-shishya tradition was based on living with the teacher and learning through everyday practice rather than listening to lectures.

Modern universities did not invent internships. They recognised an old truth: some lessons can only be learned by doing.

Today, almost every college proudly announces internship programmes. Students are sent to different organisations every year. Social media is filled with photographs of welcome ceremonies, inauguration programmes, guest lectures, group activities and certificate distribution functions. Institutions proudly report how many students participated.

But there is a more important question that often goes unanswered. How many students actually learned?

An internship is fundamentally different from an educational tour or an exposure visit. It is not about spending a few days in an organisation. It is about becoming part of its work. It is about understanding how decisions are made, how problems are solved and how professionals deal with challenges that textbooks can only describe.

Unfortunately, we increasingly confuse exposure with experience. Taking one hundred students to an organisation provides exposure, while giving ten students responsibility to conduct field surveys, analyse data, prepare reports, attend review meetings and solve real problems provides experience. Exposure creates awareness, whereas experience builds competence. The distinction is important because the purpose of an internship is not to impress students but to prepare them.

Another concern is the growing mismatch between students and host organisations. Many organisations genuinely wish to support higher education but simply do not possess the capacity to mentor large groups of interns. A small NGO with five staff members cannot meaningfully guide thirty students at the same time. Mentorship requires time, patience and continuous interaction. Without these, internships risk becoming attendance exercises rather than learning opportunities.

Similarly, internships are sometimes allocated without considering academic relevance. An environmental science student should ideally engage with forests, rivers, biodiversity, climate adaptation or environmental governance. A journalism student should learn reporting, interviewing, documentation and editorial processes. A sociology student should work with communities and institutions. When placements are made simply because an organisation is available, rather than because it offers meaningful learning within a student's discipline, both the student and the institution lose.

The UGC guidelines recognise these challenges. They call for clearly defined learning outcomes, trained mentors, institutional partnerships, continuous supervision, project work and proper evaluation. The emphasis is not on the number of interns but on the quality of learning.

This is where our attention must shift back. Higher education should not measure internships by the number of certificates distributed, the number of photographs uploaded on social media or the number of institutions that signed memoranda of understanding. Those are administrative achievements, not educational outcomes.

The true success of an internship becomes visible much later—when a graduate begins asking better questions, solving practical problems, working confidently with others and applying classroom knowledge to real-life situations. That is what experiential learning was always meant to achieve. As colleges get ready to send a new group of students for internships this year, it may be worthwhile for every institution to pause and reflect on one simple question before planning yet another inaugural ceremony.

Are we sending students out to complete a requirement, or are we sending them out to discover the world beyond the classroom?

The answer to that question may well determine whether internships become one of the finest reforms in Indian higher education—or just another ritual in an already crowded academic calendar.

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