

Magic wand for employability?

AICTE has made three internships mandatory during undergraduate studies, to combat unemployment. But there are perceived downsides to this new policy

■ SPATIKA NARAYANAN

The All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) announced in July that students of technical institutions would have to complete three internships during the course of their undergraduate studies. This has come into effect from the 2017/2018 academic year.

In the past, AICTE, under the Ministry of Human Resource Development, signed MoUs with LinkedIn and Internshala, an internship platform, in order to better 'prepare the talent graduating from the country's technical institutions and to increase their employability. But as per the latest announcement, the onus is on the institutions themselves to facilitate internships for their students and set aside time for them in their academic calendars. Each internship must span four to eight weeks.

Mixed feelings

This arrangement has been met with mixed feelings. For instance, it has been contested that internships cannot be a panacea for gaps in the education system. "We are convinced that it is not the lack of industrial exposure that makes students unemployable; it is quality education which is lacking. No one can overcome four years of poor education with three months of internships," says Professor Pankaj Jalote, Director, Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology, Delhi.

Even if unemployment is due to lack of prior industrial experience, it is possible that students may try to game the system or treat compulsory internships with a 'let's just get it over with' attitude. "AICTE's move has the potential of giving rise to another coaching industry. There are around 10 lakh engineering students graduat-

ing each year and only a few thousand good internships. With this new mandate, there could be mushrooming of new businesses, created only to provide internship certificates," adds Prof. Jalote.

At least one business, though, wants to create a culture of meaningful internships in the country. Internshala founder and CEO Sarvesh Agrawal shares, "After our MoU with AICTE, we opened our 'College Registration' feature to help colleges find internships for their students. This feature is free for colleges, and they can register all their students on it in one go. We have been testing the feature with over 500 colleges and over 1,200 students have found internships through this feature so far."

Agrawal believes that, if done right, internships have multiple benefits. Besides serving to help students sample

and gauge interest in multiple fields, and providing on-the-job training, internships could reduce the placement burden on colleges, since students may receive a pre-placement offer (PPO) on finishing their attachment. He acknowledges that it may take time and effort for these benefits to materialise: "Students need to be equipped with relevant skills, as companies expect students to have some prior knowledge and skill even for internships."

In either case, now that internships are a part of the engineering curriculum, it pays to plan how to utilise the three stints. Agrawal advises students to earmark the first as an opportunity to acquire soft skills and the second to learn practical skills. For example, the first internship could be at an NGO, in content writing, management or sales. The second internship

can be used to apply theories learned in the classroom, and determine career choice.

The final one should be treated as the gateway to a first job. "An internship's main purpose is to learn about the industry and practical skills. Students should choose those internships which offer maximum learning opportunity, over stipend or brand name. Startups are a great place to learn since the teams are small. You get to do and learn a lot, as well as interact with senior team members directly," he says.

But students should bear in mind that internships aren't the only factor affecting employability upon graduation. And quality internships stem from a strong academic background. "Good internships are driven by good education, and not vice-versa," reiterates Prof. Jalote.



Work and study: An internship with NASA.