by Ines Drieselmannr

The Experience Paradox: Why Employers Want What Students Can't Yet Give

When Marta, a second-year undergraduate, began applying for internships, she kept hearing the same thing: "*We're looking for someone with more experience.*" Despite her strong academic record, motivation, and curiosity, doors remained closed. What she needed wasn't more talent, it was a chance.

This is the **experience paradox**: students are expected to arrive ready but are given few structured opportunities to get ready. Globally, the problem is intensifying. The International Labour Organization (ILO) reported that more than **64 million young people aged 15-24 were unemployed in 2023** – a historic low, yet still a stark indicator of under-utilised potential. Meanwhile, the **World Economic Forum** has flagged **skill gaps** as the leading barrier to business transformation.

Generation Z is acutely aware of this disconnect. They're not content to wait until graduation to begin their careers. They want purpose, agency, and real-world engagement from day one. Yet, at many universities, professional development remains an afterthought.

At IE University, we saw this not just as a gap to bridge, but as an opportunity to **reimagine how** students engage with the world of work, and **when**.

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A Structured Shift: The Young Corporate Programme (YCP)

In response, we launched the **Young Corporate Programme (YCP)**, a four-year, experience-integrated track embedded directly within the undergraduate curriculum. Selective by design, the programme evaluates candidates based on academic performance, communication skills, and professional ambition.

The structure is intentionally developmental:

- **Year 1.** Discover: Students are selected and invited to visit companies, attend networking sessions, and meet industry leaders. The aim is to foster curiosity and sectoral fluency.
- **Year 2.** Learn by Observation: Selected students shadow professionals, engage in structured mentoring, and observe how decisions are made across different corporate contexts.
- **Year 3.** Intern with Purpose: Students complete global, tailored internships aligned with their studies and

career goals. These are not administrative roles, but co-designed placements where students apply learning, tackle real business challenges, and contribute meaningfully to projects.

- **Year 4.** Capstone with Relevance: In collaboration with faculty and corporate partners, students tackle real challenges through a final project that bridges academic theory and professional practice.

The results speak for themselves. Over **90%** of participants secure internships or job offers with partner companies. More than **70%** say the experience shaped their career direction.

"*Before YCP, I had no idea what kind of role would fit me. After shadowing a team at one of the partner firms and interning with them in my third year, I not only found my path, I landed a job offer before graduating.*"
(YCP Student, Class of 2023)

Whether students come from STEM, humanities, or business backgrounds, YCP meets them where they are, offering challenge, support, and the chance to contribute.

Employability as a Learning Outcome

Too often, employability is siloed, delegated to career services, and separate from the core academic mission. In a world where work is evolving faster than curricula, that model no longer serves.

At IE, we consider employability a learning outcome. Through YCP, students don't just accumulate knowledge. They learn to navigate ambiguity, communicate across disciplines, and function effectively in professional environments. These are not soft skills but foundational competencies.

"*By the time students join our teams, they already understand our culture and priorities. It reduces onboarding time and creates a smoother, more strategic talent pipeline.*" (Corporate Partner Executive)

Faculty play a central role, collaborating with employers to uphold academic rigour while ensuring relevance. The careers team leads selection and employer matching, prepares students through coaching, and helps build their capacity for long-term employability.

What if universities taught professional readiness as intentionally as they do finance or ethics? What if work weren't an add-on, but part of the curriculum from the beginning?

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A Global Movement with Local DNA

IE is not alone in rethinking this timeline. Programmes like Northeastern University's Co-op model in the US, the University of Waterloo's alternating work-study cycles in Canada, and Germany's dual study programmes are proving the value of sustained, work-integrated learning.

What makes YCP distinct is its **coherence across four years**, its focus on **intentionality and reflection**, and its adaptability to a **global, diverse undergraduate population**. It requires no extra semesters, just rethinking the rhythm.

YCP was designed as a cross-disciplinary model. Structured exposure and guided reflection support students across all fields – whether in engineering, design, liberal arts, or business.

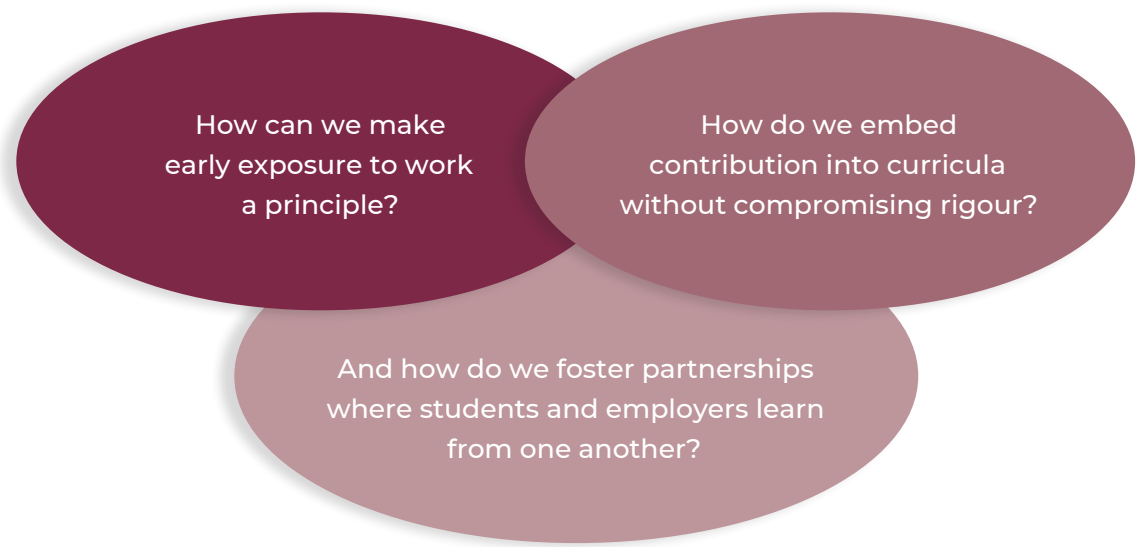
Early exposure is no longer a differentiator. It's becoming a baseline.

What Comes Next?

The experience paradox is nothing new, but the urgency to solve it has never been greater. Young people today are not simply looking for knowledge, they're looking for direction, impact, and the chance to begin.

Programmes like YCP are one way to respond. But they raise a larger, more urgent question for the academy: how should higher education evolve to prepare students for lives of contribution?

For institutions, this means asking hard questions:



These are not only pedagogical questions; they are strategic ones. In grappling with them, universities can do more than prepare students for the future. They can help shape it.

And perhaps, in doing so, keep hopes alive for the next generation entering it.

For More Information

For more about the Young Corporate Programme, visit:
https://www.ie.edu/talent-careers/recruit-at-ie/young-corporate-program

About the author

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