Summer Vacation Placements – creating internships that work

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Background: Unpaid pharmacy placements have recently come under fire from students who have found placements to be unfair with some providers not prepared to take on unpaid students due to a recent employment tribunal hearing. This has resulted in a reduction in the duration and number of vacation placements available; whilst demand for unpaid experience has spiralled.

Method: During summer 2013 one UK hospital expanded its vacation program and contracted 20 students for 4 week placements consisting of strict 50:50 split of provision of education and training activities in return for involvement in departmental activities. All placements were supported by a timetable, a mentor and a workbook with competency assessments for particular activities. Audit and project work was also provided. Those completing the placement to a satisfactory level were awarded a certificate.

Results: 96% of the contracted weeks were completed giving a total student input of approximately 2888 hours with 50% (1444 hours) directed to departmental work including audits and counselling checklist formation. The 4% not completed was due to sickness and interview attendance. The initiative was evaluated by informal student interview, feedback from pharmacy staff and review of student work.

100% of participants stated that the split of time was equitable, that audit and project work carried educational merit, and they would apply for future hospital placements or pre-registration positions. No staff declared any burden produced by the presence of the students in their areas in relation to student output. All work produced was seen to be at (30%) or above (70%) the level expected.

Conclusion: It is possible to produce equitable pharmacy internships which provide benefit to the trust and the student in a cost neutral manner. Students appreciate the opportunity to learn in a practical environment and can attach learning objectives to many types of departmental activity.