

IN THIS ISSUE

Who Can Afford to Intern?

We examine the financial and practical barriers that prevent many young people from accessing internships and work experience, and how IntoUniversity is helping to make these opportunities more accessible.

The Value of Internships

As our Big City Bright Future and Khadija Saye Arts internships mark their 12th and 5th years, we hear from alumni and corporate partners about the lasting impact these opportunities have on young people and organisations alike.

Employability at IntoUniversity

Employability support doesn't begin at 16. Explore how we help young people build the skills, confidence and aspirations they need for the world of work from age 7 to 18 and beyond.



Big City Bright Future 2026 cohort

Who Can Afford to Intern?

The sun is up, school is out, and summer internship season has arrived.

Ask someone where their career began and many professionals will point to a summer internship. But around the country, talented young people face financial pressures, geographical barriers, and the invisible currency of ‘who you know’, often keeping that door firmly shut. For young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, the race to opportunity can feel like it’s over before it even begins. *[continued overleaf]*



By Liam Casey, Lead Senior Corporate Partnerships Officer

Who Can Afford to Intern?

[continued from front page] A Sutton Trust survey of recent university graduates found that 55 percent of young people from a middle-class background had completed an internship, as opposed to 36 percent from working-class families. Moreover, the gap between the groups grew from 12 to 19 percentage points since the study was last conducted eight years ago. The same research found that 6 in 10 internships undertaken by recent graduates were 'unpaid or underpaid'. The figure is more dire in the creative sector, where 86 percent of interns were unpaid as of 2018. It seems that internship accessibility is only getting worse, not better. Why?

Socio-economic disparity remains a primary barrier. A 2018 study found that undertaking an unpaid internship in London would cost a single student at least £1,019 per month. With rising rents and inflation, that number is surely much higher in 2026. For students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are unable to count on support from adults at home, costs like these put unpaid and even underpaid internships out of reach. Facing a heavy financial burden, they choose to not put themselves forward for opportunities.



Geographical barriers can also play a significant role. Young people living in rural or economically disadvantaged areas face reduced geographic mobility, and with most internships based in London or other big cities, opportunities are frequently distant and

inaccessible. Students at IntoUniversity regional centres have told staff that traveling for internships prevents them from carrying out their caring responsibilities, or how they feel they must prioritise the part-time jobs they already have and cannot afford to be away for extended periods. Even when an internship covers travel costs, these are most often only station-to-station, but door-to-station costs can also be prohibitive.

Professional networks also have an outsized influence on accessibility. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds rarely have industry contacts, which presents a significant challenge when most internships are never made public (one 2017 study found that of the estimated 70,000 internships available each year, only 11,000 are advertised). Most placements, then, are secured through personal connections rather than open competition. The result is an uneven playing field where opportunities are based on who you know, not merit.

Despite these barriers and others, young people from communities like those served by IntoUniversity continue to persevere and secure potentially life-changing opportunities. This doesn't mean their challenges are over, however. On placement, students can struggle with the unfamiliar environment and 'rules' of a corporate space, a lack (real or perceived) of professional experience compared with their more advantaged peers, cultural biases, a lack of confidence, and a lack of belonging. Tackling these barriers to accessibility requires sensitivity, inclusivity, and a determination to support young people of all backgrounds.

IntoUniversity's Big City Bright Future (BCBF) summer internship programme, with its one-week skills bootcamp preparing over 100 students from around the country for a two-week placement, seeks to address accessibility hurdles. Through communications and professionalism workshops; confidence-building exercises; networking with industry leaders; and

sessions ranging from project management to women's perspective on working in male-dominated industries, BCBF bootcamp equips interns with the skills and insights to succeed at their host firms in London, Manchester, and Edinburgh. The Khadija Saye Arts internship does the same for young people interested in creative careers. At earlier ages, Business in FOCUS workshops allow young people to delve into the world of work from the comfort of a corporate space. The work is far from finished, of course, with room to improve accessibility for regional students as well as the range of professional networks available, but the impact on our young people is evident.



Big City Bright Future, Khadija Saye Arts, Business in FOCUS – none of these programmes would be possible without corporate partners who understand the need to break down barriers to impactful opportunities. This summer, our BCBF partners will be paying salaries, widening access to students in the North West of England and Scotland, providing meals, and offering mentoring. In short, they will be implementing many of the measures needed to address accessibility. With research showing that four or more encounters with an employer makes a young person 86 percent less likely to not be in education, employment or training (NEET), opportunities like BCBF make a tremendous difference. While a more equitable internship landscape will require committed efforts from policymakers, employers, and educators across the country, it's clear there are models for a path forward.

Acorn Fund Innovation: Big City Bright Future Regional Pilot

Since it began in 2015, our Big City Bright Future internship has provided young people in London with the opportunity to gain meaningful work experience with leading employers. As the programme, and IntoUniversity, has grown, it has expanded to enable students from across the UK to take part through placements with our partners in their London offices, giving hundreds of young people the chance to experience living and working in the capital while building the skills, confidence and networks to support their future careers.

Building on the success of this model, we have been exploring how we can create similar opportunities by drawing on the wealth of employers and career

pathways available in cities across our network. As well as showcasing the breadth of opportunities that exist across the UK, expanding the programme regionally also helps make the internship accessible to more young people. For some students, responsibilities at home or part-time weekend work can make it difficult to spend three weeks away from home, meaning they would otherwise be unable to take part.

Having successfully expanded our internship offer to Edinburgh for Scottish students in 2022, this summer we launched a pilot programme in Manchester through our existing partnership with AJ Bell. The pilot enabled interns from the local area to complete

their bootcamp week in London before returning home to undertake the remainder of their internship in Manchester. We hope this partnership will continue to grow and provide a model for expanding employment opportunities in other regions.

This project is one of six supported through the Acorn Fund, which enables colleagues to develop and test innovative ideas that respond to local needs and explore how successful approaches could be expanded across the organisation. We are grateful to the funder whose support has made this work possible.



The Value of Internships

Our Big City Bright Future and Khadija Saye Arts internship programmes mark their 12th and 5th years in 2026. Over the past decade, hundreds of young people have gained invaluable experience, developed new skills and built confidence through paid internships with employers across the finance and arts sectors. We spoke to alumni and employer partners about why these opportunities matter, not only for the young people taking part, but for host organisations too.

For many students, an internship is about much more than gaining experience. It can transform how they see themselves and what they believe is possible.

Altaja, who took part in the Big City Bright Future programme in 2025, said:

"Going into the BCBF Programme I really felt like I had a bit of imposter syndrome...I thought I might not be right for this position but as time went on I feel like I can really see myself working in this position now. The internship really helped me develop myself professionally...and helped me access different opportunities... Having that experience really helped me improve my application...I really believe that I can get into it now."



Anna, who completed the Khadija Saye Arts internship in 2022, described the lasting impact of working in London and meeting professionals across the creative industries.

"Doing the internship has definitely improved my professional and employability skills...it's great on the CV and it makes you stand out... Meeting professionals in the industry was very important... I think internships like this matter because there are a lot of people who benefit from things like this and don't get the opportunity."



For employer partners, the benefits are just as significant. Alongside supporting the next generation, internships can bring fresh ideas, enthusiasm and opportunities for colleagues to develop through mentoring.

Nick Moss, Head of Post Trade and Operations Product Management at MarketAxess, said:

"Hosting Big City Bright Future interns brings fresh perspectives, curiosity and energy into the business... It reinforces our culture of learning, inclusion and community engagement, while giving employees a rewarding opportunity to mentor and support the next generation of talent."

One moment stands out in particular.

"One of my favourite memories was seeing one of our employees, who had previously been through the BCBF programme, act as a role model for the students... I would strongly encourage other employers to get involved. The investment of time is relatively small compared with the impact it can have on a young person's future."

Emma Potter, Director of Community Engagement and Belonging at AllianceBernstein, has seen that impact first-hand over almost a decade of partnership.

"Whenever AB participates in the Big City Bright Future programme, the interns bring the office to life...It's not just technical skills that the interns learn; they are building relationships, growing in confidence and...broadening their horizons and realizing that a career in Finance is accessible and achievable."

Reflecting on each year's programme, she added:

"My favourite part is the last day...listening to what the interns have learnt and seeing how far they have come. I feel proud to have been a small part of their journey and I know their experience at AB will stay with them."

Together, these experiences demonstrate the lasting value of internships. For young people, they open doors, build confidence and create pathways into careers that may once have felt out of reach. For employers, they strengthen workplace culture, inspire employees and help build a more diverse future workforce.



Employability at IntoUniversity

Employability support doesn't begin at 16. Throughout our programme, we help young people build the skills, confidence and aspirations they need for the world of work from age 7 to 18 and beyond.

1

Primary school



Primary Academic Support: Career-themed starter activities linked to the degree topic of the term. Students can read fact files about a career and learn about an influential figure in this career.

Primary FOCUS:

“What is a Career?” workshop – Year 3/P3: Students explore different careers and imagine themselves 15 years in the future.

“Careers in Action” workshop – Year 4/P4: Students discover three different careers through practical activities and discuss transferable skills.

2

Secondary school



Secondary Academic Support: Students can take part in Future Readiness projects plus personalised careers and application support.

Secondary FOCUS:

Transferable Skills and Careers – Year 9/S2: Students build transferable skills and explore how they connect to careers.

Communication in the Workplace – Year 10/S3: Students develop workplace communication, applications and interview skills.

Business in FOCUS: Students experience the workplace through a one-day dynamic and competitive business simulation.

Careers in FOCUS: Students explore career pathways through interactive workshops with volunteers.

3

Post-16



Applications Workshops: Students get support with CV writing, cover letters and interview preparation.

Professionalism Workshops: Students develop workplace behaviours and professional communication.

Corporate Mentoring: One-to-one mentoring for Year 13/S6 students with professionals for university and career planning.

Insight Days: Students visit employers or universities and explore future pathways.

Work Experience: Students take part in multi-day placements with leading organisations.

Big City Bright Future: Students can apply for a paid three-week internship with leading employers.

Khadija Saye Arts Internship: Students can apply for a paid three-week internship with leading arts organisations.

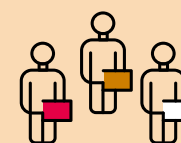
1:1 Career Coaching: Students receive personalised careers guidance from volunteer professionals.

Networking Events: Students meet professionals, hear career journeys and build connections.

CV & Interview Support: Students receive personalised support with CVs and mock interviews.

4

Post-18



Associates-only insight days and networking events:

Career events designed for university-aged IntoUniversity alumni.

Preferential access to apprenticeships and other early career opportunities:

Students can gain preferential access to apprenticeships and graduate opportunities through our partner organisations.



We would love to hear your feedback about *aspire*.

To get in touch or to find out more about IntoUniversity please visit our website www.intouniversity.org, drop Vicky an email at aspire@intouniversity.org or call us on 020 7243 0242.

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