

# Bridging the Gap: How Micro-Internships and Earn-While-You-Learn Models Are Transforming Higher Education

Alumly-HEDx Conference Paper

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# Foreword

Higher education is experiencing a profound global shift. Learners today expect more flexible, fast-paced, and accessible education, influenced by digital consumption trends and evolving workforce needs. At the same time, the rising cost of traditional degree programs, growing student debt, and the increasing need to balance learning with earning have created a tipping point for education systems worldwide.

The skills landscape is also changing rapidly. As industries demand continuous upskilling, lifelong learning has become essential. However, traditional models struggle to keep pace with these changes. Population shifts, workforce shortages, and geopolitical tensions are further intensifying the demand for new, more inclusive learning pathways.

In response, we are witnessing the rise of a new learning economy—such a new economy will embrace integrating education with employment in innovative ways. This shift is creating new opportunities for both traditional institutions and emerging education providers. This paper explores key developments in this evolving landscape, including two pioneering "earn-while-you-learn" models described here by David Yip of HEDx partner Alumly. These are just the beginning of a broader transformation that will shape the future of global education and work.



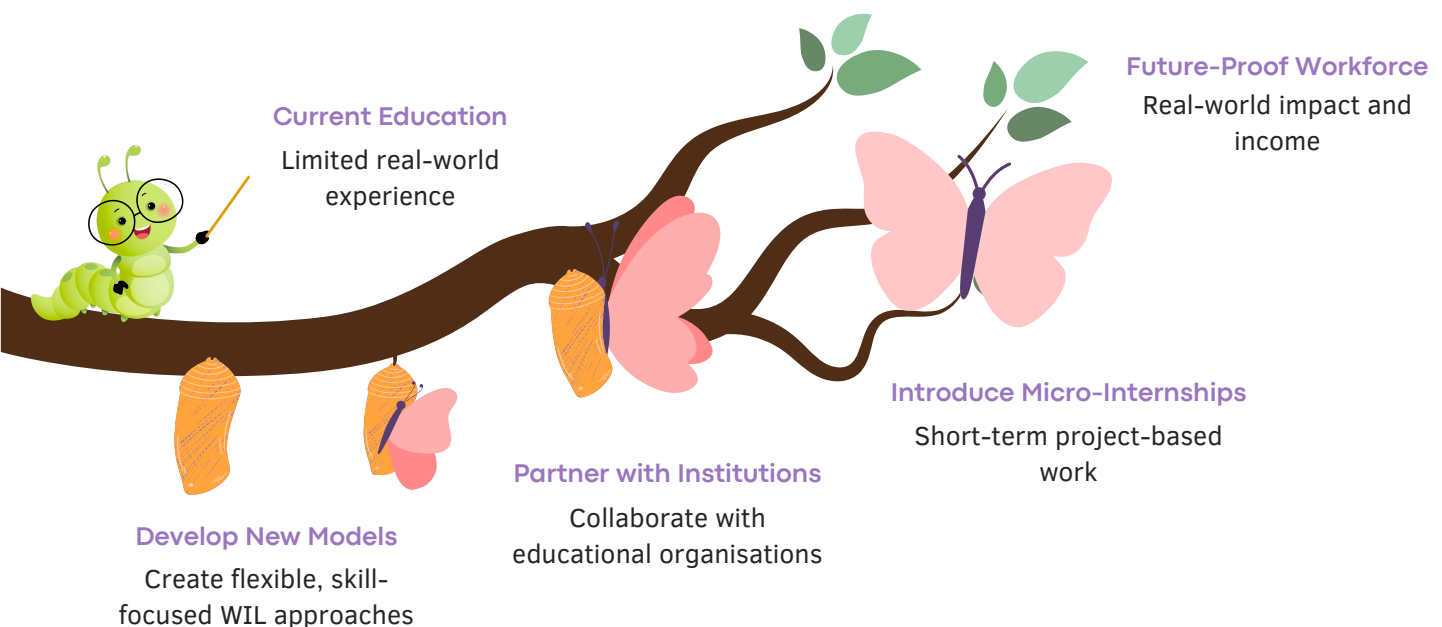
**Dr. Martin Betts**  
Co-Founder and CEO, HEDx

Dr. Martin Betts is a renowned higher education leader with over 40 years of experience driving innovation in universities. As the Co-Founder and CEO of HEDx, a global content and advisory service for higher education transformation, Martin is shaping industry conversations on leadership, strategy, and change. He previously served as Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Engagement) at Griffith University, where he led major university-wide initiatives in industry engagement, student employability, and campus development. Martin has also held senior leadership roles across universities in Australia, UK and Singapore.

This paper explores two main types of EWYL models, where students are engaged in real paid work by employers, while they are still enrolled in either full time or part time courses. One of these are "Degree Apprenticeships", introduced in the UK a decade ago, where institutions partner with employers to provide students a structured, multi-year program that involves a full-time job while also studying for a degree. The other are "Micro-Internships" pioneered by US firm Parker Dewey around the same time but focused on short and varied experiences with many employers instead of developing deep skills in a chosen field from one employer. To address the speed and scale of change in the workplace, expected to only accelerate in the world of AI, tertiary institutions should consider both types of EWYL models for their students, to build a more adaptive, inclusive, and future-proof workforce ecosystem.

# Executive Summary

Earn While You Learn (EWYL) models in higher education are becoming increasingly important and popular, driven by changing student expectations and industry demands for more focus on professional skills and workforce readiness. Post pandemic workforce trends and technological advancements such as Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) has accelerated and amplified the need for tertiary institutions to adopt new approaches that blend knowledge, skills and real work experiences to better prepare students for their careers. For example, research by the Future Skills Organisation (FSO) show that industry leaders in the financial services and information and communications technology (ICT) sectors express concern that current training programs often do not adequately prepare learners with the necessary skills for employment (FSO Industry Insights, 2024). When put into the context that Australia will need 312,000 additional technology workers by 2030 to meet industry needs (Deloitte, 2024), the urgency to adopt bold, innovative models to developing our next generation workforce is clear.

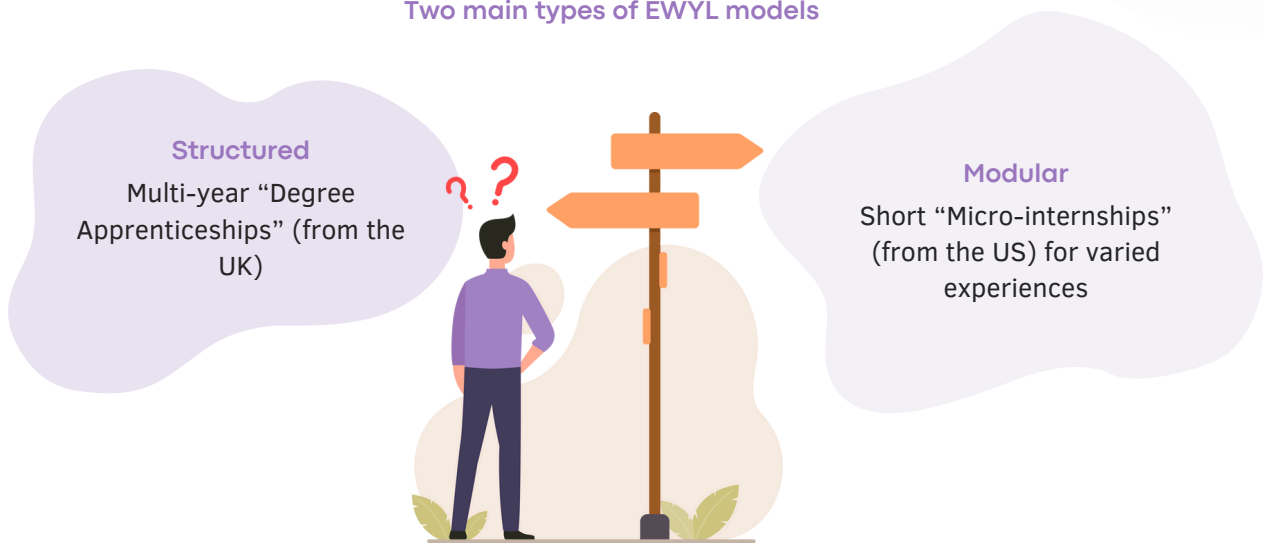


## Key Takeaways

- EWYL models like short term Micro-Internships offered by hundreds of institutions in the US, or longer-term Degree Apprenticeships popular in the UK, allow students to earn an income while pursuing their education.
- Micro-Internships offers short-term (a few hours to a few months) and usually paid work experiences from multiple employers, enabling students to explore many career pathways.
- Degree Apprenticeships offers a structured, multi-year program where students are in full-time paid employment at a partner employer while also pursuing a degree in a related field.
- Global trends such the gig economy, GenAI and policies such as those from UK are supporting the adoption and expansion of micro-internship and degree apprenticeship EWYL models

# THE NEED FOR A NEW WORK INTEGRATED LEARNING MODEL

Two main types of EWYL models



Employers increasingly demand job-ready graduates with practical experience, yet many students struggle to access meaningful, flexible work opportunities (Universities Australia, 2019; Williams et al, 2024). Universities face mounting pressure to enhance employability outcomes for all their students and not just a select few, while containing program costs. Meanwhile, their industry partners seek scalable, efficient ways to engage emerging talent.

Traditional internships and job placement programs are inherently resource intensive programs to run, hence constrains

opportunities to large, well-resourced employers. This means most students miss out on quality work experience, especially from the small-to-medium employer sector (Woody, 2024), which also happens to bear the brunt of skills shortages in the economy.

Furthermore, many require unpaid commitments that disadvantage students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Thorne & Young, 2024). Universities must evolve beyond traditional internships by embedding modern, flexible, accessible, and quality work experience solutions into their degree programs.

METRIC	SMBs (ABS: 1-200 employees)	Large businesses
Skills shortage prevalence	65–78%	21–36%
Response to shortages	Raise wages (80%)	Reskill staff (49–52%)

# PAID WORK EXPERIENCE: BETTER FOR STUDENTS, EMPLOYERS, UNIVERSITIES

“Placement Poverty” refers to the financial hardship students face when undertaking mandatory, unpaid placements (like in nursing, social work, or teaching) as part of their university studies, potentially leading to difficulties affording necessities. Unfortunately it is common and has the potential to deter tertiary participation and completion (O’Kane, 2024). Earn While You Learn models can be a practical way to address this issue and also improve early experiences in the workplace and perceptions of employment in the relevant industries. The good news is that there is no shortage of global examples where innovative EWYL models are already proving both popular and impactful to students, employers and tertiary institutions:

- **Micro-internships by Parker Dewey (USA):** Thousands of micro-internships are offered annually across hundreds of US tertiary institutions through Parker Dewey’s program, increasing student employability and reducing hiring friction for companies. Their 2025 report (Rueger-Miroewski, 2025) on the impact of micro-internships on the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) career-readiness competencies found that nearly 90% of students who completed micro-internships indicated improvement in three or more competencies.
  - **Oklahoma Baptist University (USA):** Business students are required to complete three micro-internships in marketing, operations, and finance (Green, 2024). Participants secured full-time roles 47% faster than non-participants, and 63% received job offers from host organisations
  - **Oxford University (UK):** Integrates micro-internships into its career development framework, enabling students to engage in short-term industry projects.
- **Degree Apprenticeships (UK and Canada):** Popular in the UK, these programs combine full-time employment with structured academic learning. Participants earn salaries while studying, leading to higher retention and employment rates (Bolton, 2024).
  - **Manchester Metropolitan University (UK):** More than 600 employers partners participated in its program in 2024, with 93% agreeing that apprenticeships are supporting their talent pipeline and 91% agreeing they are addressing skills gaps (Young, 2024).
  - **York University (Canada):** As a Canadian first, its Bachelor of Applied Science in Digital Technologies provides students with work full-time while studying, earning an average salary of \$45,000 CAD annually (York University, 2024). 90% of its graduates in the Shopify cohort were converted to full-time positions.



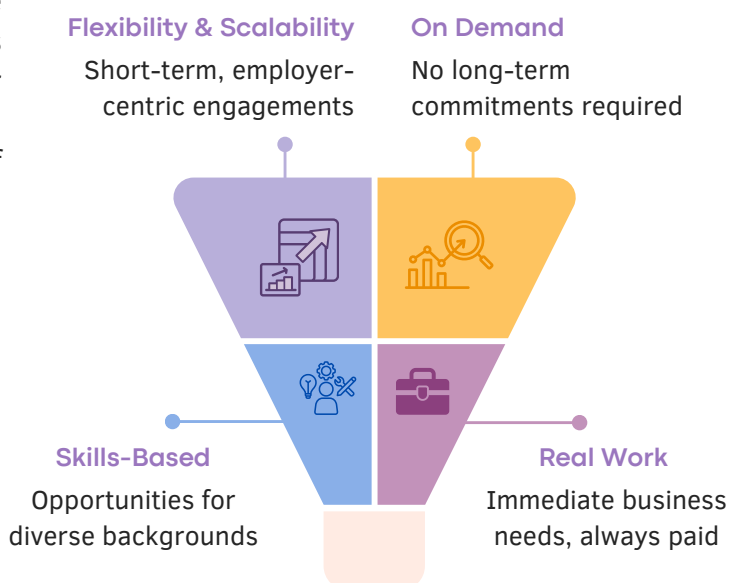
# MICRO-INTERNSHIPS: A FLEXIBLE, SCALABLE, AND IMPACTFUL ALTERNATIVE

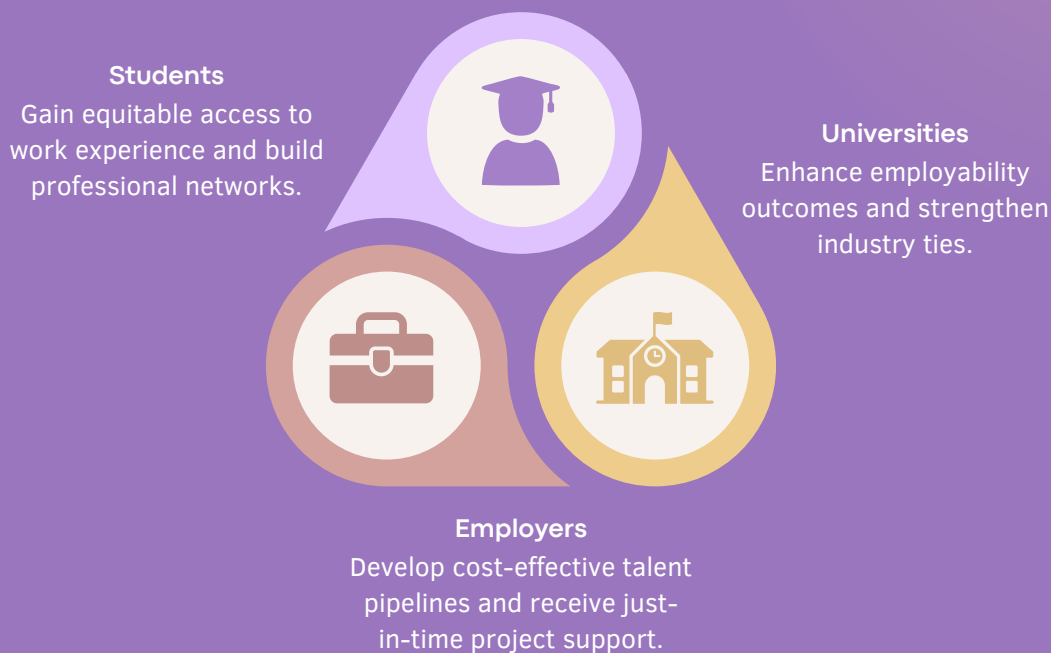
Micro-internships are flexible as they are short-term, from a few hours to a few months, and employer centric. These project-based experiences allow students to gain real world experiences, build professional networks, while assisting organisations with real tasks. Unlike traditional internships, micro-internships are typically:

- Real work that businesses need done immediately and often paid
- On-demand and short engagements without requiring long term employer commitments, or for students to stay in organisations for longer than their project requires
- Skills-based which provide more opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds, capabilities, and life stage needs, including part-time and mature-age.

They are easier to source given the bite-sized engagements from a much larger pool of employers, and hence inherently more scalable. They are also faster for students to complete and demonstrate impact. The scalability of this model has seen pioneers such as US based Parker Dewey see their programs now offered by more than 800 institutions and taken up by tens of thousands of students since their founding in 2015. In another example, UK based Virtual Internships have grown from providing 100 students with internships in 2019 to 6,000 students less than 3 years later.

Importantly, micro-internships are an impactful alternative to traditional internships, as they are more closely aligned to the global workforce trending towards skills-based career pathways (FSO, 2024). Many workplaces are undergoing work redesign considering how AI is transforming work, and recognising gig and freelancing being an integral part of the organisation (Mercer, 2025). Companies are moving to become more “skills-based”, as they transition from functional structures to cross-functional, task-orientated and collaborative teams (Cantrell, 2022). For example, famed US healthcare innovator Cleveland Clinic moved from being organised by medical specialties and specific job titles such as “doctor” or “nurse” to broadly defining all staff as “caregivers” responsible for treating not just physical ailments but also patients’ spirit and emotions. Grouping staff around patients and their illnesses instead of departments of medical specialisations also helped to foster an innovation culture and development of new treatments.





## BENEFITS FOR STUDENTS, EMPLOYERS AND TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

### FOR STUDENTS

- **Equitable Access to Work Experience:** Paid micro-internships reduce Placement Poverty, offering more meaningful opportunities to more students
- **Flexible, Practical Learning:** Students gain cross-functional skills faster with micro-internships than traditional internships.
- **Build a Professional Network during their Course:** Students engage with multiple employers across industries, supporting career discovery

### FOR EMPLOYERS:

- **Cost-Effective Talent Pipelines:** Micro-internships reduce recruitment mismatches.
- **Just-in-Time Project Support:** Businesses benefit from short-term, valuable student work effort without long-term commitments.
- **Find Hidden Talent:** Using skills-based hiring approaches unlocks new sources of talent that would otherwise be overlooked under traditional experience based and keyword searches.

### FOR UNIVERSITIES:

- **Enhanced Employability Outcomes:** Students who have completed micro-internships secure full-time employment faster than peers
- **Stronger Industry and Community Ties:** Companies that host micro-interns report increased likelihood of hiring participants long-term.
- **Scalable Solution:** Attract small to medium businesses and open up far more work experience opportunities to be able to support all student needs

# HOW TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS CAN IMPLEMENT EWYL MODELS



**Think Big, Start Small, Scale Fast**

What if **every student** in your institution could have not one, but multiple paid work experiences throughout their course, then graduate seamlessly into their chosen career? Start with a Big Bold Vision to inspire and guide, select a school or faculty to nurture a cohort of early adopters, then enlist student evangelists to help scale your program across the institution.



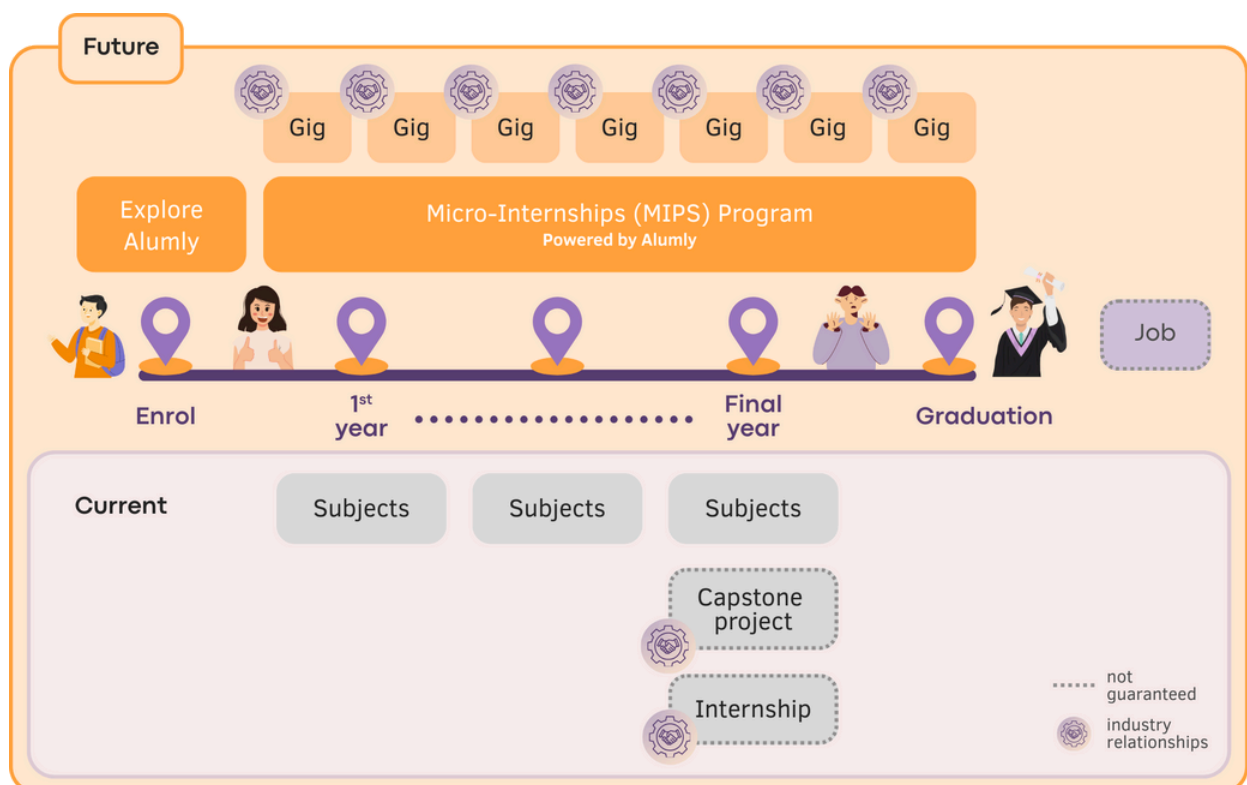
**Co-Design programs with employers and students**

Facilitating direct employer and student engagement in curriculum design will not only ensure the program will suit both your institution and your industry partners, but also be attractive to your students, as you bring all key stakeholders along the journey.



**Collaborate with solution providers that blend technology and business needs**

Work with digital platform providers that not only automate student-employer matching but also takes on the employment risks and administrative burden of offering EWYL models such as micro-internships, so institutional resources can focus on industry engagement and student career advising.





# About Alumly

Co-designed with input from academics and hundreds of students from leading Australian universities including La Trobe, RMIT and Deakin, Alumly is the first AI-powered, skills-first Earn While You Learn platform developed from the ground up to enable our partner institutions to scale their employability programs to all their students.

With student equity being a core focus of higher education reform in Australia, providing access and opportunity to paid work experience at the scale necessary has been at the heart of Alumly's vision for the future, guiding our investment strategy and product roadmap. Recognising the significant operational bottleneck for both institutions and employers in current internship and placement programs has led to our decision to adopt the micro-internship EWYL model for its inherent scalability.

Alumly helps tertiary students secure paid gigs and build their professional networks during their courses, while helping employers solve their skills shortages. The Alumly platform reduces the costs, risks and complexities of hiring students, and increases the career relevance of courses offered by tertiary institutions. In short, Alumly takes on the employment risk and administrative burden, so institutions and employers don't have to, freeing up institutional resources to focus on student career advising activities, and industry and alumni engagement.



## The Author



**David Yip**

Founder & CEO  
Alumly Pty Limited

David Yip is the Founder and CEO of Alumly Pty Limited, Australia's first micro-internship based Earn While You Learn platform. Prior to this, he has been a technology industry executive for over 20 years, most recently as APAC Education Industry Director at Salesforce leading large scale digital transformations. David is an active participant in Australia's education ecosystem, including serving on the Future Skills Organisation's Innovation Taskforce, Earn While You Learn Technical Committee, and as Advisory Board Member to UNSW Business School. Balancing David's edtech and business focus, he also serves as Board Director to Australia's largest multi-arts precinct, Abbotsford Convent, and hosts his own Podcast "(Re)Learning Work", exploring the future of work and learning in a world being reshaped by Agentic AI.

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