



TOWARD AN EFFECTIVE INTERNSHIP FOR EARLY CAREER GRADUATE ADVANTAGE, IN HIGHER EDUCATION, A MIXED METHOD RESEARCH

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Abstract

The notion of employability has invaded the traditional role of the university, 'pursuit of knowledge for the sake of the knowledge' and now live in harmony with each other. Internship is the new phenomena that appears in the university education with implicit legitimacy of the module because of perceived significant career advantages for undergraduates with internship experience that benefit not only for the students but also for the university, employers (Gault et al., 2002) and other stakeholders too.

This research was designed as a mixed method of research to uncover significant insights into the effects of internship from the point of view of the students. The perceptions of the interns with regard to the internship office of the Higher Education Institute, employers' contribution and the usage of soft skills during the internship were quantitatively measured. The qualitative research was carried out with the same sample to agree, disagree and explain with the findings of the quantitative data analysis. The findings by converging of the data analysis are remarkable to make the existing internship programme effective. One of findings was that the choosing the location for the internship is influenced by ancillary objects of internship such as ease of finding it rather than the primary objective of internship such as preparing the students from classroom environment to the world of work for purpose of early career success.

Keywords: Internship, Work Based Learning, Work Related Learning, Employability, Early Career Advantage.

Introduction

This study is based on sandwich programmes of a Higher Education Institute (hereinafter referred to as HEI) that offers Computing (Software/Networking), Accounting, Health Information Management and Business Management undergraduates to undergo an internship module at a workplace throughout their one of the semesters out of nine semesters during four and half years of their studentship. The internship module is offered in their seventh semester during which the students are attached to a workplace so that they able to experience work based learning.

The work based learning designed by HEI by way of internship module as a part of the programme furnishes benefits to the stakeholders of the higher education. Two empirical studies carried out (Harvey et al., 1997; Johnson and Burden, 2003) show that the work based learning experienced by students during their education is an invaluable contribution for the personal and professional developments of students. Taylor (1988) cited in (Maertz et al., 2014) pointed out that those who have undergone an internship receive more job offers and better salaries than those who have not undergone an internship. The employers of the opinion that the students who have had work based learning during their programme possess more employability skills than the students who have not undergone such a work experience. Cook et al (2004) point out that the students, higher education institute and employers are the main beneficiaries of work based education.

This is obvious that the real life employment environment gives an ample opportunity to the undergraduates to apply their knowledge and skills learned or developed at their higher education institute. Successful work based learning gives benefits not only to the students but also to all other stakeholders including the society. However, internship does not itself necessarily provide benefits. In other words, the mere formal curriculum is not just adequate for the purpose but the whole environment should be aligned for the purpose (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991 and Astin, 1997 cited in Brenda & ESECT, 2005). The purpose of internship is that the students should be able to learn from the experience. The learning by application of knowledge and skills is the goal of the internship module.

At least three stakeholders, students, higher education institute and the employer, have to play an active role in a well-designed internship module. The higher education institute by their internship office has to play a vital role before commencing the internship and after commencing the internship till the conclusion of the internship. In this regard, assessing of the internship of the student and provision of suitable employers and provision of adequate orientation of the employer engagement are some issues to be addressed by the HEI. The role of the employer is also paramount. Provision of suitable working environment, provision of adequate orientation and provision of relevant duties etc are required for quality internship. The student's role is to apply the knowledge and skills learnt and developed in an actual working environment.



In these circumstances, the purpose of this study is to make the existing internship module effective. In this regard it is required to identify the weaknesses of the existing internship module from the point of view of the students and to recommend how the internship module could be made effective with a view to achieving the following objectives

1. to identify weaknesses of the existing internship module and
2. to provide recommendations for rectifying those weaknesses

And therefore the research questions are as follows

1. Do the interns perceive that they have been adequately prepared by the HEI for their internship if not why
2. Do the intern perceive that they have been adequately trained by their employer during internship if not why
3. Do the interns perceive the importance of employability skills during their internship if not why

Literature Review

As an institute in the higher education, a university is remarkably identified as an academic institution that enjoys an academic freedom with a long history. The very first evidence in the Europe for academic freedom could be traced back to the charter of first university, University of Bologna which was established in the early part of 12th century. In 1986, University of Bologna by the document called Magna Charta Universitatum proposed to the rest of the universities to endorse the validity of the notion of academic freedom in their universities. Many universities in more than 80 countries have now endorsed the notion of academic freedom and others agree the notion. No single debate could be observed against the notion except evolution and it continues.

Academic freedom means the freedom for the faculty, students and even other stakeholders of the university to engage with their intellectual debates without fear of censorship and retaliation. They enjoy conviction of freedom in teaching, learning, researching and practicing for the sake of the knowledge. These intellectual debates are needed to create knowledge for the betterment of the people. Polanyi (1958) argues that academic freedom is a fundamental necessity for the production of true knowledge. In this tradition, the core values of the higher education became pursuit of knowledge for the purpose of the knowledge with detachment from the affairs of the world. Minogue (1973) points out that this separation from the affairs of the world is required to be only remote from the world affairs rather than responsiveness to external affairs because external forces outside the academy may prevent the freedom to ascertain the true knowledge. In this manner, the pursuit of knowledge for the purpose of the knowledge became the sole purpose of universities.

After nearly a millennium from the origin of academic freedom, the sole purpose of university, 'the pursuit of knowledge for the purpose of knowledge' has evolved with cultural, political, technological and pedagogical realities. Barnett (2000) point out that the curricular has been subject to change during around 100 years due to two reasons, one of them is that mass higher education system at universities require to respond external influences such as growing student market and the interest of employers. The other reason is that the state wants to see that the graduates are able to be responsive for world of work. He further elaborates the second reason by stating that there is a universal shift in the direction of immediate performance in the world of work, namely, "what counts is less what individuals know and more what individuals can do". This is today commonly called employability skills.

In support of employability skills, two remarkable teaching styles, work related learning and work based learning have intruded in to the pedagogies of higher education. Brenda & ESECT(2005) cited Quality and Curriculum Authority's definition for work related learning as "planned activities that use the context of work to develop knowledge, skills and understanding useful in work, including learning through the experience of work, learning about work and working practices, and learning the skills for work" and Brenda & ESECT (2005) further cited the comment of Gray (2001) for work based learning as "Learning at higher education level derived from undertaking paid or unpaid work. Work based learning, however, is the means through which a discipline is delivered, not the discipline to be studied. So work based learning is not a subject for study – It is a mechanism for learning". Apart from the distinction which can be derived by comparing the definition and the comment for work related learning and work based learning, another the basic distinction between these two learning styles is that many work related learning activities such as case studies, role plays, client based live projects, enterprise training, field trips etc take place subject to a disciplinary control of the university. In work based learning, the students are attached to a workplace for a specific period so that they are able to get an experience on the job subject to a disciplinary control of the employer. The most popular kind of work based learning is called internship at a work place.

However, since the core value of the universities is for pursuit of knowledge for the purpose of knowledge, these two learning styles appear to be a threat to the academic freedom unless these styles are within the truth and objective knowledge. Becher (1989) identified four domains of knowledge on the basis of Kolb and Biglan's work hard pure, soft pure, hard applied and soft applied knowledge. Even-though the classification of these learning styles relating to the objective



knowledge will be a debate under the epistemological identity, these learning styles can be placed in the soft applied domain due to the provision of disciplinary and generic knowledge of higher education apart from the preparation of graduates to the world of work (Boud and Solomon, 2001).

However, work based (internship) or work related learning has a long history. Gault et al., (2000) pointed out that credits for internship module were offered for nearly 100 years. The legitimacy of the internship is supported by various researchers. Maertz et al., (2014) pointed out that it roots up-to the traditional teaching methods of Aristotal and Confucius. The governing authorities of curricular, around the world now encourage the application of these learning styles in the pedagogies and curricular. Brenda & ESECT (2005) point out that these learning styles are now becoming statutory requirement in England and Wales (Quality and Curriculum Authority).

Internship as a sandwich module in the programmes offered is the most popular work based learning style between HEI and the students today (Maertz et al., 2014 cited Coco, 2000; Hall et al., 1996; Sides and Mrvica, 2007) and Maertz et al., (2014) further identifies three types of benefits for interns, job related benefits, Career related benefits and Networking/Job market benefits. In other words, It gives an opportunity to the students to transfer the classroom knowledge into the world of work by beginning to learn job related learning with the internship in a section or department in an organization. While doing job related learning the interns start gaining the knowledge of careers in the industry and build network relation with the supervisors and others interacted during the internship.

Methodology

In the presence of formally designed professional practice/internship module for Business Management, Accounting, Health Information & Software/Network programmes and in mean time considering the mixed feeling of the interns about the effectiveness of the internship programme, this research becomes an explanatory research design to find why the existing internship module is not effective from the point of view of the students.

Since the data which is collected from the students by way of structured questionnaire during their internship at their work place by their lecture/tutor who is visiting the interns for grading, becomes sensitive despite of the fact that the confidentiality of the responses was maintained. The data so collected under the quantitative research method is not robust enough to explain the complexity of the internship. Hence, this research survey was conducted as a mixed method, Creswell & Clark (2011) defines mixed method research “as a method, it focuses on collecting, analyzing and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or series of studies. Its central premise is that the use of quantitative and qualitative approach, in combination, provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone”

Glesne & Peshkin (1992) explained the underlying rationality of quantitative research stating that the quantitative research leads the researcher to consider that the world is made of observable and measurable facts on the assumption that social facts have an objective reality and variable can be identified and relationships can be measured. Golafshani, (2003) argues that the assumption above mention is problematic in a complex social context.

The quantitative part of this research was based on an ordinal-scale/Likert-scale questionnaire as paper based questionnaire. Both ordinal scale questionnaire for quantitative research and the open ended questionnaire for qualitative research were tested by a pilot running. They were first tested by administering among expert group, the other researches in the campus. Thereafter they were administered among non-expert group, individuals who are similar to respondents' capacity and finally they were piloted among a part of student population who will complete in the main trial.

After pilot running, the quantitative data on a Likert scale was first collected by the lecturers while visiting the interns at their workplaces. After collecting the quantitative data, they were first analyzed. Thereafter qualitative data was collected from the when the interns visit the lecturer/tutor for handing over their internship final report at the campus. Observations of the lecturers/tutors who checked the interns twice at their work places were also gathered. Internship programme booklet, Module descriptor and the weekly log book were also perused.

Population & Sample: In the seventh semester, out of nine semesters, undergraduates of Business Management, Accounting, Health Information Management and Computing (Software/Networking) of the university in the last semester of 2016 were attached to private and public sector organization for a period of one semester. These interns studied their disciplines at three locations of the HEI, Gaborone, Francistown and Maun but they were attached and located at various locations for their internship despite of proximity of their campus. Hence, they were scattered all over the county sometimes 1000 km away from their campus. They were to be supervised by the lecturers of the campus near their internship location. As a result, the authors of this research and their inmate lecturers of the campus were assigned to supervise each of the interns twice during



their internship period. Hence, the total population subject to this study is 147 interns (N=147) out of which 109 students responded the questionnaire (n=109). There is no specific reason for the remaining students not to answer if accessed. 109 students who responded are a representative sample with a confidence level 95% and confidence interval (Error of margin) of 5%. However, A sample of 121 students are required for a confidence level of 99% but the remaining interns were not accessible after the second visits of lecturer/tutor have been completed within the time period allocated for data collection. The demographics of respondents are as follows. 51% of the interns were male and 49% of the interns were female. 79% of the interns are below 26 years old and 18% of the interns between 26-30 years old and the balance 2% is above 30 years old. 34% of the interns from the Gaborone campus, 38% of the interns from the Francistown campus and 28% of the interns from the Maun campus. 50% of the students belong to Computing, 29% belong to Business Management programme, 11% Accounting programme and remaining 10% belong to Health Information Management programme.

Discussion

Internship has become now part and parcel of many programmes at HEIs around the world with a view to giving a career advantage by transferring classroom experience to real world of work for their undergraduates. Gault et al., (2000) who carried out a research to examine the relationship between early career success and internship found that undergraduates who undergo an internship receive early career advantage than undergraduates who do not undergo an internship in their programmes. Maertz et al., (2014) endorsed the finding above mentioned by citing Harryson and Lorange, 2005; Hazelwood, 2004 and Feldman et al., 1999; Mihail, 2006; Taylor, 1988) and in mean time drew the attention that there are contingencies which inhibit the benefits of internship (Maertz et al., 2014 cited Muehlemann et al., 2007; Perlin, 2012).

A mixed method research was carried out in order to uncover the factors that hinder the effectiveness of the internship and factors that make it effective. Since data collected on a Likert Scale questionnaire is quantitative, nonparametric statistics were used to analyze ordinal scale data. Percentages were used to identify findings. Top 2 Boxes means the sum of those who 'strongly agree' and 'agree' as a percentage. Bottom 2 boxes is the sum of 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' as a percentage. Bottom 3 boxes is the sum of 'neutral', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' as a percentage. Bottom 3 Boxes than the Bottom 2 Boxes are important to mitigate the biasness of responses because the responses were collected while checking the internship by the tutor/lecturer despite of the fact that interns were clearly literally and verbally informed that "this survey does not have your name on it, so your comments and inputs are confidential, which means that no one will know how you answer these questions. We need your feedback to make internship module effective for you". The biasness occurs in many respects, the intern had to complete the Likert questionnaire in the presence of the lecturer who was visiting them for grading the internship during the visit and even thereafter after submitting the final report of their internship. In order to conduct a competitive internship and to develop competencies for offering the module of internship, it is recommended to consider Bottom 3 Boxes than Bottom 2 Boxes at the discretion of the reader.

My internship Office of the HEI for my internship

Moghaddam, (2011) studied the perception of students in relation to internship and found that students perceive that the internship office of the HEI should play an effective role to make their internship meaningful. With regard to the effective contribution of internship office of the HEI for internship, three questions were posed on the Likert scale questionnaire and the responses were analyzed. Accordingly, when considering the bottom 3 Boxes, it appears that 40 interns out of 147 interns do not agree that the internship office of the HEI has prepared the interns for their internship and it was further found out that

01. 85% of the interns were attached to Government or Parastatal. Even-though the government is the main provider of employment in the past it has become now obviously competitive by the decreasing demand and increasing supply of graduates every year. Placements for internship have been dictated by ancillary reasons such as easy to find the employer, intern's close relative are working there, The internship locations are close to their home. Interns receive an additional monetary benefit when the location is far away from their campus etc. In these circumstances, it is recommended to fairly distribute interns between the public sector organizations and private sector organizations paying the attention for the purpose of the internship, namely, job related benefits, career related benefits and job market benefits of the interns.

02. the Government and Parastatal are able to provide some employments, none of the programmes of the HEI offer modules for public administration before the internship or after the internship. It is recommended to introduce few modules required for public administration and public finance and other modules related to where necessary.

3. 16.5% of the interns were directly assigned at their work place with duties related to human resource management and general administration. Other interns who were assigned duties in Accounting & Finance, Marketing and others represent 32.6% whose duties also partly involved with human resource management and general administration. However, these



Students did not have an opportunity to follow Human Resource Management Module before commencing of their internship. Accounting & Finance interns need the knowledge of accounting software before commencing the internship. And therefore it is recommended to rearrange all the modules in all the programmes giving priorities for modules necessarily useful during internship so that the interns could follow them before beginning of their internship.

04. The interns were not given adequate time period to find a placement for their internship. In such circumstances, they were compelled to find any employer but not the suitable employer for their programme. It is recommended to give adequate time period to find an employer. It is further recommended to create a database for employers who have not only undertaken to train the interns but also who have meaningfully trained the interns. In this regard, interns who have completed their internship and the tutors who have visited should be consulted.

05. Both the interns and employers in the interest of the interns wish to have the internship in their last semester instead of present internship in the seventh semester. If they could do their internship in the last semester they are of the view that they could at least continue their internship until they find an employment and the employers also agreed with that proposition of the students and further suggested that there may be a possibility to provide employments also. And therefore it is recommended to allow the internship in the last semester, ninth semester instead of seventh semester which would provide benefits to most important three stakeholders of higher education, Students, HEI and the employer. Alternatively, It is recommended if the HEI has to offer the internship before the last semester of the students, then they could be allowed to complete their remaining modules in distance learning against classroom learning.

06. The interns needed more interaction with the tutor/lecturer who visits twice during the internship period not enough specially with Software/Network interns. It is recommended to create forums or any other communication with the interns and the respective lecturer/tutor to be interactive

07. The letter (Request letter for attachment) issued by the internship office to the employer is common letter for both types of students, those who have completed their programme and those who have not completed their programme. It is recommended to indicate in the said letter that the interns have completed their studies or not at the HEI so that the interns who have completed the studies would be able to continue their internship or employed at the end of the compulsory internship period at the discretion of the intern and employer.

08. The internship period was limited to four months which is not sufficient for the interns to receive job related benefits, career related benefits and Networking/Job market benefits. It is recommended to plan well before the internship so that the semester allocated for internship could be extended for the maximum benefits of the internship.

My Employer for My internship

The commitment of the employer during the internship period is very important to transfer classroom experience to workplace experience so that the students are able to get a career graduate advantage. Moghaddam, (2011) studied the perception of students in relation to internship and found that students perceive that the internship sponsoring employer should play an effective role to make their internship meaningful. In this regard the following six questions on the Likert scale were posed and the responses were statistically analyzed.

Accordingly, when considering the bottom 3 Boxes, it appears that 17 intern out of 147 interns do not agree that the employer of their internship has effectively contributed for their internship. When compared with the effectiveness of the internship office as discussed above, Student perceives that the commitment of the employer is somewhat better than the internship office for their internship. However, it was further found out that

01. In some cases interns were always assigned for minor duties such as taking photo copies, print outs, typing etc, they were disappointed that they had to repeat the same without some important duties relevant to their programme. And therefore It is recommended to co-ordinate with the students and their supervisors to identify such cases as early as possible and rectify at their level best by rotating the intern in other departments of the same organization at the same site or to change the supervisor because the very purpose of the internship is not to have a permanent supervisor or any other reason during the internship but the guiding principle is to have a quality work based learning for the intern. All other reasons should be compromised to have a quality work based learning to be afforded by the intern during their internship.

02. There is a communication gap and inadequate understanding among the three parties, employer, intern and the lecturer/tutor in relation to the very purpose of the internship. Some interns do not receive duties relevant to the programme. Some students and their supervisors do not discuss their difficulties with each other. Some employers do not take



responsibility to train the intern and too much sympathetic towards interns especially for their grading, daily attendance for duty and the interns are not disciplinarily control by the employer.
03.

And therefore it is recommended to continuously educate the three parties, employer, interns and lecturer/tutor with regard to the very purpose of internship. And it is further recommended to make all possible ways available for the communication and interaction among three parties.

The usefulness of Soft Skills required for Internship

The interns perceive the importance of soft skills during their internship. Moghaddam, (2009) referring to Floyed and Gordon (1998), Boatwright and Stamps (1988) and Gault et al. (2000) and pointed out that the internship is able to provide various soft skills such as oral and written communication, analytical skills, computer application skills, creative thinking, problem solving, Leadership, teamwork, time management, self-discipline etc. Interns may have formally learnt them or not, they will experience and apply them while undergoing the internship. In this regard twelve questions relating to soft skills above mentioned on the Likert scale were posed and the responses were statistically analyzed.

Accordingly, when considering the top 2 Boxes, it appears that 92% of the interns agree that the soft skills/employability skills are useful during their internship. The remaining 8% do not perceive the importance of them. It is un-debatable that the soft skills also called employability skills are imperative for achieving early career graduate success. In the analysis

It was found that the policy documents of the HEI stipulate the importance of soft skills stating that they produce well rounded employable graduates. At the end of the internship period, each supervisor for the intern should submit a report a part of which refers to the employability skills of the student during the internship in relation to Attitude to Work & Learning, Team work and interpersonal skills, Leadership qualities, General Communication Skills (Written & Oral), Creativity, Problem Solving Skills, Punctuality and time management, Adaptability to current trends/technologies. However, it was found that none of the programme develops or teach employability skills systematically throughout the program instead of offering few modules, Communications & Study Skills I and II & Introductions to Computers to teach basic soft skills but no systematic approach to teach for many soft skills such as attitude to work & Learning, Leadership qualities, Creativity, team work, Time management. For example, interns while studying are frequently requested to do some activities in a team but no at least a part of module that was devoted to teach the guiding principles of team work. And therefore it is recommended to map the soft skills throughout the programme and develop soft skills systematically instead of haphazard manner and deliver a substantial part of soft skills & before beginning of the internship so that the interns would be able to further develop them while experiencing the internship.

Conclusion

Internship/Professional practice is a learning style which is coming under work based learning style which gives an early career advantage for graduates in higher education. Maertz et al., (2014) pointed out that the students receive three types of benefit from internship, Job related benefits, Career related benefits and Networking/Job market benefits. Students who have undergone an internship receives more employment opportunities than the students who have not undergone an internship (Taylor, 1988). Internship provides benefits not only for the students but also the other two important stakeholders, the HIE and the employer (Cook et al., 2004). The higher education institute that was subject to this study, also mandatorily offers a module called professional practice/internship which is conducted during the whole period of one semester. The said HEI has designed a formal module/s in this regard with clear aim stated there that “the internship is to create a balance between the learning theory and practices in the real world...”.

When the internship of the HEI was tested in a mixed method of research it was found that the existing internship module is an acceptable level but not as effective as intended. It was further found that three parties involved in the internship, Student, HEI and the employer have to play their roles effectively for effective internship.

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