

Expectation vs Reality : A Study on the Significance of Practical Training for Future Graduates

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Abstract

This paper reports the significance of an internship experience which is intended to assist students to obtain jobs as soon as they graduate. It also discusses some of the reasons graduates fail to obtain jobs after graduation. Feedback from employers (from place of internship) via questionnaires and interviews was analysed to gain insight into what employers expect from graduates, how the graduates performed during the internship and what is expected of them in the future. One of the common problems cited by stakeholders/employers is graduates do not have the necessary skills to perform certain jobs. It was discovered that employers expect the graduates to possess a high communicative ability, to be well motivated, to have positive attitude, willingness to learn and interpersonal skills. In addition, some of these future graduates were found to be lacking in commitment, perseverance and knowledge of office etiquette. This paper highlights the crucial role that internship plays in ensuring that graduates secure employment after graduation. Internships greatly increase the chances that a student will gain full time employment after graduation. Reports often reveal that while prospective employers have specific expectations of the interns and that some are willing to provide training, they are confronted with issues relating to candidates' language proficiency and their competence in a number of soft skills.

Keywords: *Internship, stakeholders, communicative ability, interpersonal skills, language proficiency, softskills*

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

An internship programme is work experience that offers participants the opportunity to gain valuable experience in a chosen field. The significance of an internship programme for many university graduates is without a doubt indisputable. Many graduates are not aware of its importance until they are about to attend a job interview; without undergoing an internship programme, the chances of attaining a position in one's dream company would be difficult.

According to Burnsed (2010) what sets a graduate with a degree from the rest of his/her peers is an internship; it is integral to obtaining employment even within six months upon graduation. Thus, graduates with paid or unpaid internships at an accomplished organization will have an advantage of obtaining a better career than those who have not experienced internship or those who have undergone an internship which does not correspond to their educational training.

A research conducted by Ernst & Young (2011) showed 81% of the employers sourced for the study had observed that candidates with relevant internship experience are better prepared than those without internships. In another survey conducted by the same company (Ernst & Young 2012), it was suggested that a degree alone is insufficient and that students need to develop and display some resilience if they are to secure employment. Although many students have core-skills such as problem solving and are able to build relationships, they are not always willing to take risks and can suffer from setbacks.

In a study by Katajavuori et al (2006) on the impact that practical training had on students, it was concluded that

not only was it a valuable experience for them but the candidates acquired practical skills and knowledge in a working community of professionals. These are among some findings in studies where the importance of an internship programme is emphasized.

Many reasons have also been cited for the importance of an internship programme; these include gaining real-world experience, setting yourself apart from others, applying knowledge gained in classes hence continuing one's learning process, enabling one to evaluate potential employers just as employers are afforded a chance to evaluate potential full-time candidates over a span of time, gaining hands on experience in an office setting and becoming part of a team, gaining self-confidence, and improving oral and written communication skills (Groovejob.com, About.com Internships, Katajavuori et al 2006, BYU 2012).

From the employers' perspective, it is also true that students need to stay focussed on what they are good at and develop their experience around these core areas, rather than trying to cover all bases. This in turn will help to build confidence in their abilities and improve their levels of resilience (Eccleston 2012, Centre of Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP)). In the study, even though 83% of candidates were confident of achieving their career goals, they were forewarned against becoming complacent.

From the students' perspective, Hergert (2009) reported that students' demographic profile correlates to how they value internship, the structure of the internship, and the connection to their career plans.

Thus, it is clear that students stand to gain a great deal of experience, knowledge and many other skills during their internship which give them added value and enhance their potential for employment. In addition, it is also evident that in order to succeed students need to be prepared and well informed of the requirements and expectations of their prospective internship employers before they set out for the practical training. While they make their own preparations and often seek for information single-handedly, it is also the university's responsibility to assist students by providing short courses or internship preparatory seminars.

This paper uncovers some of the common problems cited by stakeholders/employers of students. They claim that students do not have the necessary skills to perform certain jobs; they require assistance and are often dependent on the senior staff. It was also discovered that employers expect the graduates to possess a high communicative ability, to be well motivated, to have positive attitude, willingness to learn and interpersonal skills. In addition, some of these future graduates were found to be lacking in commitment, perseverance and knowledge of office etiquette.

1.2 *The objectives of the study*

The aim of this paper is to show that while an internship programme plays a crucial role in ensuring that graduates secure employment after graduation, there are many aspects that require attention before students attend internship, while they are in internship, and the post internship stage. In addition to employers' expectations and feedback afterward in terms of students' strengths and weaknesses at the workplace, students' feedback on their experiences are also presented. Furthermore, the paper reports on some suggestions and recommendations from the employers on how candidates can be better prepared for their internship. The paper concludes with recommendations on how the internship programme at a faculty can be strengthened through improved preparatory courses/seminars, evaluation and monitoring of candidates as well as supervisors, and the duration of the internship. For this purpose, data gathered from a programme in English for Professional Communication is used to illuminate these points.

2. **Data Gathering Method**

2.1 *Participants for the study*

The participants in this study were final year students of English for Professional Communication (EPC), a program offered in one of the institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. The participants went for their internship in organizations of their choice, subject to the faculty's approval. Data from 2 cohorts were examined.

The EPC program structure emphasises language and communication, linguistics, critical thinking, cross-cultural interaction, management, entrepreneurship, interactive multimedia design and development and organizational behaviour. EPC is a three year program which was first offered in 2006. After several cohorts the employers suggested some possible careers for these graduates in the field of Corporate Communication, Public Relations Journalism, Editorial & Copy Writing, Translation, Interpreter, Marketing Executive, Management, Human Resource, Quality and Document Control, and Business Development.

2.2 Data for the study

The data were obtained from the following:

- a) student interns who were in the final year degree programme in English for Professional Communication (EPC) which is offered in one of the higher institutions in Malaysia,
- b) supervisors from the faculty
- c) supervisors/employers from the organization (stakeholders)

The data obtained for this report were gathered from interviews between supervisors from the faculty and supervisors from the organizations of internship and also feedback from students' interview. The data were also triangulated with evaluation report on the performance of interns in the organizations they were attached.

3. Results/Findings

This section discusses employers' expectations of the interns based on the feedback provided by the employers from organizations which took in interns from the program. It also discusses findings from students' questionnaires and interviews on their internship experience.

3.1 Employers expectations of the interns

3.1.1 Communicative ability

The employers interviewed insisted that interns should have a good command of the language. This would provide them an edge over the other interns. Moreover it would contribute to the good image of the organizations. Organizations claimed that with an excellent communicative ability, be it spoken or written, it would be much easier for students to secure placement in certain organizations.

3.1.2 Independence

Most employers interviewed preferred that interns be independent and able to deal with tasks and challenges. Employers mentioned that they would need someone that could be left with minimum supervision due to the hectic nature of certain organizations. Thus having an intern who is independent would be beneficial for the organizations..

3.1.3 Confidence

Employers would like to have interns who have a high level of confidence in terms of expressing themselves and carrying out tasks given to them. In this way the interns would be given more responsibility since employers would trust their ability to fulfill these responsibilities.

3.1.4 Proactive

Employers expect interns to offer assistance to other employees and not to wait to be called for help. Interns should be proactive and ask for tasks if they are not assigned to do anything. They should take the initiative to find ways to improvise or improve work situation. They should be willing to learn and not be afraid to ask questions and seek clarification if they are in doubt.

3.1.5 Team player

Interns are expected to blend well with the rest of the staff in the organization. This is one way that they could learn from others about the organization and also about the tasks and responsibilities shouldered upon them. In this way they not only learn about the tasks but also about human relations. This would help tremendously once they venture into the real working world. They would also be aware of the importance of working in a team for task completion as well as to achieve success.

3.1.6 Discipline

Interns are expected to have a high level of self discipline in terms of punctuality, behavior at the workplace and appearance. They should know about the etiquette at the workplace. They should not involve themselves in office politics and always use discretion when instructed to carry out tasks which are not related to work or which involve after office hours.

3.1.7 Motivated and a positive attitude

Interns should have vision in terms of the direction of their career. They should be motivated to work hard and always wish to improve themselves. They should possess a positive attitude and be brave to face whatever challenges ahead of them. Optimism is one of the characteristics that employers want in the interns and their employees.

3.1.8 Duration of internship

Most of the employers reported that the duration of the internship program should be extended from 3 to 6 months. According to most of them 3 months is too short a time for students to learn the traits of the job. The first 3 months according to them is the time for interns to get settled in the organization. And the following months would be the time for interns to apply what they have learned and eventually be tested in the field. The students tend to take things easy since they know that they are not going to be with the organization for long. They sometimes carry out tasks without the intention of completing them and wait for the permanent staff to complete them. This is something that employers sometimes face.

3.2 Qualities that interns possess (employers' feedback)

Based on the analysis of the study, the employers stated that some of the positive qualities that the interns possess currently are:

	Positive	Negative
1	Leadership quality	Dependent
2.	Determined	Lack of confidence
3	Conscientious	Punctuality
4	Responsible	Laid back
5	Proficient	Insensitive to office culture
6	Proactive	Commitment
7	Time management	
8	Soft skills	
9.	Commitment	

3.3 Students' Feedback

3.3.1 Preparation for the real world

Most of the students interviewed felt that the internship program was useful and necessary to prepare them for the real working world. They mentioned that they learned of job etiquette and other skills such as the ability to meet deadlines, negotiation and interpersonal skills, perseverance, patience, discipline, obedience and determination.

The following excerpts were taken from interviews conducted with the interns and log book entries:

An intern mentioned that the internship "...was like a practice for me... so I sort of know what to expect when I start work" (Intern3_int).

Another intern was also in agreement when he stated that "...oh..it's very different from studying..." (Intern2_int).

In other words they felt that the internship in a way prepared them when they go out to work. All of them expressed anxiety and nervousness especially on the first day of internship. They voiced out that this would prepare them for future job interviews and would give them more confidence in carrying out future tasks at the workplace.

They reiterated that the internship exposed them to human relations which they felt was necessary since it

provided them with new knowledge and experience what to expect in the real situation. *"...very challenging tasks and I am not familiar with the working environment at all. It is awkward but I'm okay with it because I like people"* (Intern7_int)

The students insisted that the internship program is effective in providing graduates the traits which are expected and desired by employers.

3.3.2 Relevance of courses in the programme

The students stated that most of the courses offered in the EPC program were relevant to prepare them for the internship. The students felt that some of the courses such as the electives were helpful in fulfilling some of the tasks related to marketing, retailing and computer-based tasks.

One of them stated, *"they put me in the Marketing Department and I was assigned to some accounting tasks ...a little challenging but okay..."* (Intern3_Log).

Some students felt that the courses related to multi media had also managed to impress their employers *"... they were quite surprised that I was able to carry out the task of designing a website and blog..."* (Intern3_int)

The critical thinking course was also mentioned as one of the courses that they felt useful. One of them stated that *"... the critical thinking course helped me in the analysis part of a report"* (Intern1_Log).

The students also claimed that they gained skills in problem solving from their workplace. Negotiation and persuasion course helped them in terms of dealing with clients for those who were attached to organizations which required the skill. A student stated that *"I was required to 'pitch' clients and convince them to participate in a conference and I managed to persuade them to do so in my third attempt. I was so proud"* (Intern7_int).

The students also felt that the presentation practices in each course helped to prepare them for similar tasks at the workplace. Thus generally they agreed that the courses offered by the program were applicable to their internship experience.

3.3.3 Training in workplace behavior

"When I started my practical....on the first day...I didn't know what to expect...really first time experience..." (Intern4_int). According to this intern everything was really new to her and she claimed that it would be good if she knew what exactly to expect on the first day.

This was echoed by another intern who stated *"I felt really nervous..yesterday I just sat at my desk because everyone was busy...I wanted to answer the phone but not sure..."*(Intern6_int). In other words she could have been more relaxed and confident if she were given training in office management/behavior.

3.3.4 Duration of the internship

Some students felt that the 3 month duration was sufficient for them to acquire the experience to prepare them for the real world where some felt that the duration should be longer.

One of the students mentioned, *"I think I can do better if given more time..."*(Intern5_int).

This seemed to echo the employers' feedback on the duration of time of internship.

The EPC program was designed based on the guidelines and requirement of the Academic Affairs – the Curriculum Unit (UHEK) of the institution which is responsible for monitoring programs before the program is forwarded to the Malaysia Qualifications Agency (MQA) for accreditation and the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) for approval. Once a program is approved it would have met all the requirements of all the governing bodies and thus the duration of the internship is sufficient for students to graduate. Furthermore, if the length of time for the internship were to be extended, this would mean an extension of the degree program as well. Thus, the faculty agreed that the 3 month internship would remain.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this paper enforces the importance of internship. As stated in earlier studies, the significance of an internship course is undeniable.

Organizations which provided positive feedback in the study were organizations which found interns' skills, knowledge and experience relevant to the tasks given. In this way what the organizations want match the interns'

ability. When this happened it showed that the courses offered in the program are relevant to the needs of organization and thus prepare them for the internship.

Although in general, the organizations were quite satisfied with the performance of the interns, based on the study, there seemed to be some mismatch between the expectations of the organization and what interns were able to perform. As a case in point, the organizations seemed to expect the same qualities of an intern to that of an experienced employee. In terms of confidence level, team player, proactive and independence for instance, these qualities can be acquired by the interns should they be given more time in the organization. In addition, the nature and set up of an organization also determine whether an intern is capable of being independent and proactive.

In summary, although there are justifications and reasons for students' shortcomings in their performance in their internship, some measures need to be taken to rectify the current situation.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the researchers felt that the following measures be taken to strengthen the internship course for the English for Professional Communication program:

- a) A preparatory course for internship. This course should be carried out before students begin their internship at organizations. It should include office etiquette, interpersonal skills, handling telephone calls, grooming and motivational talks. All these areas should be followed by some practical and application activities.
- b) Duration of internship. It is proposed that the internship be extended from 3 months to 6 months. This was based on the feedback provided by employers and students.
- c) The evaluation process of the course. It is also proposed that the evaluation process be improved. For example, the number of times a supervisor visits an intern can be increased to give a clearer indication of an intern's performance and to detect the improvement level so that interns could be advised or made aware of their weaknesses and to improve on them.
- d) Selection of organization. Another proposition is for the faculty to be more selective when identifying organizations for students' placement of internship. In this way students would not be placed in organizations where their skills do not match the requirement of the organization.

While there is sufficient literature on the significance of an internship program and its many facets for students, the practice, as observed in this study, can be contradictory. In many courses, students are often independent in their search and preparations, and organizations also varied in their treatment and assistance for the candidates. It is hoped that the content and findings of this paper will act as an 'eye-opener' to many of us who are in this business of preparing and aiding students for better employment prospects in the future.

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