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Internship Experience: An In-Depth Interview among Interns at a Business School of a Malaysian Private Higher Learning Institution

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Abstract

With greater acknowledgement that learning takes place beyond the confines of a classroom, more emphases have been placed on internship in an undergraduate course. Interning with a reputable and large corporation provides the opportunity for students to gain first-hand experiences in the day-to-day operations of a business organisation. They not only get to be in the “thick of the action” but are given opportunities to contribute to the organisation. These enable students to put to practice the lessons and theories learnt in the classroom. This in-depth interview study was conducted with a small selected group of final year business students at a private university in Malaysia who had undergone a ten week internship at various Malaysian companies. The findings of this research will provide rich insights on internship experiences which in turn will benefit the stakeholders involved namely students, employers and educational institutions.

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Keywords: Internship experiences; private university

1. Introduction

Internship has been imbedded in many Malaysian universities as there is a common understanding that it will help prepare graduates entering the workforce. Given its importance, internship has been part of the curriculum with a certain amount of credit hours allocated. The internship programs normally run between three to six months. Internship provides an opportunity for interns to obtain a first-hand experience in the real working world. According to Calloway & Beckstead (1995), the internship experience expose students to practical skills, improve their social relationships, motivate future learning and enhances their social personality. Additionally, these students will also

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have the opportunity to discover their job interests and objectives under a professional mentor (Chen, Hu, Wang and Chen, 2011).

Internship also provides companies with potential recruits. Rothman (2007) explained that internships are an essential part of recruitment success for many companies where a specific department often manages the internship program with the educational institutions. This will ensure that internships are meaningful experiences which develop the human capital and will result with better learning experiences for the interns.

Thus far, most researches on student internship in Malaysia are quantitative in nature. As interns are the main benefactor of the internship, their feedback is crucial in ensuring that the entire program meets their expectations. In order to gain rich insights of the interns' experience, in-depth interviews were conducted among four purposively selected interns. The interns were from the third batch of business students at a private higher learning institution which underwent a three month internship program at various companies in the Klang Valley. The internship program contributes towards a quarter of the marks awarded towards the student's final year research project. As the internship program is still in its infancy stage, it is hope that this study can illuminate the experiences that the interns undergo and highlight areas for further improvement. Overall, this study aims to contribute to the limited qualitative literature on internship experiences especially from a Malaysian perspective.

This paper firstly discusses the importance of internship among business undergraduates from a variety of relevant literature. It will then describe the internship program offered at the private university where the interns are studying. Next, the rich textual data from the in-depth interviews are presented and analysed. Finally, recommendations for further improvement of the internship program are discussed.

2. Literature Review

Numerous authors have defined internship. Internship according to McMahon and Quinn (1995) is a 'supervised work experience' whereby a student is under special attention during the internship instead of working alone in the industry. Pauze, Johnson and Miller (1989) viewed internship to be similar to a fieldwork, field experience, practicum, co-op or experiential learning. It is an experiential learning that gives students opportunities to integrate and consolidate thinking and action as suggested by Davies (1990). Renganathan, Abdul Karim and Chong (2012) defined it as a chance for students to incorporate their on-the job work experience and knowledge into their university education by being in a supervised and planned real-world professional work environment.

Martin and Wilkerson's (2006) study on 132 accounting students at Wake Forest University found that the interns agreed that their internship provided them with solidified understanding of prior academic work, beneficial for subsequent academic work, provided them with new insights into courses and improved understanding of concepts. They also discovered that the students agreed that their internship experiences provided them with a better appreciation for accounting and business courses.

In order to have a deeper understanding on students internship experience, Rothman (2007) conducted a qualitative study based on the content analysis method over a 5-year period among 345 business interns at a university in California. She discovered that clarity of tasks, clear communication and expectation around challenging assignments could improve students' internship experience. Her study also revealed that students viewed internships as previews of full-time experiences with the job, industry or employer. In addition, she opined that internship materials or handouts from the career services at the university should clarify expectations regarding the internship.

In a study conducted by Paulins (2008) in the United States of America among 260 students who underwent internship in the retail industry, it was revealed that the major differences between store-based internships and other site types is the level of tasks variety that was offered. Similar with the study by Rothman (2007), she found higher level of tasks variety need to be given attention when providing store based interns with higher job satisfaction. Furthermore, she concluded that variety in the job scope, feedback and autonomy were important contributors

toward job satisfaction. Opportunities to work and interact with others also added to a positive work experience. On the other hand, pay was not a factor that affected the satisfaction level of the internship.

Based on their studies among 111 undergraduate students at an American liberal arts college who undertook business and management courses, D'Abate, Youndt & Wenzel (2009) found that job characteristics and the work environment strongly influenced internship satisfaction. They added that interns will be more satisfied if their work significantly impacted others and the organization. Feedback from supervisors also showed a positive relationship with internship satisfaction.

In their structural equation modeling study among 160 business undergraduates and graduate interns and firms providing an internship program in the United States of America, Lord, Sumrall and Sambandam (2011) concluded that student maturity, initiative and responsibility affect performance, which in turn drives the firm's satisfaction. They added that opportunities to apply academic skill, accomplish goals and express ideas influence interns' satisfaction with the firm. Another quantitative research among two different groups of college business students at the Craig Business School was conducted by Moghaddam (2011). He discovered that overall these 561 students found themselves academically prepared for business internships, the internships provided them with business education and prepared them for their future careers, and the school's internship office and internship sponsoring companies/agencies were effective in student placement and support. However, he found those perceptions/expectations were stronger for students who have yet to undertake the internship than those who had or were undergoing one.

From an Asian perspective, a study conducted in Taiwan by Chen et al. (2011) among 543 college students majoring in leisure management found that a majority of them did not face any negative experiences while interning. Their study also discovered that pleasant feelings, learning experiences and valuable efforts were the three most important factors that influence students' satisfaction with the internship and the higher likelihood of engaging in the leisure industry with less thought of a career change.

In Malaysia, Muhamad, Yahya, Shahimi & Mahzan's (2009) quantitative study among 156 accounting undergraduates who undertook their internship at accounting/auditing firms discovered that these interns perceived that the internship benefited them but found that their expectations were not met. Their knowledge in the public sector accounting was enhanced and the internship provided them with the necessary information and experience in choosing the right career path upon graduation. The interns also felt that the duration of ten to twelve weeks of internship were inadequate for them to learn and gain the required knowledge.

In this study, four interns at a private university were purposively selected to study their internship experience in the Malaysian context. It is assessed appropriate to use in-depth interviews in order to probe the individuals' subjective experiences (Wimpenny & Gass, 2000). This will enable the understanding of subjective meanings of the interns' lived experiences.

2.1. Internship at Taylor's University

The internship program for the business degree students first commenced in late 2011 and it is a mandatory academic requirement for the final year project completion. Students will have to undergo the internship for a minimum period of at least 10 weeks. Prior to the commencement of the internship, students will have to attend various pre-internship workshops. Upon completion of the internship, the students have to submit an Internship Report. These students are assessed on a variety of criteria which include the preparation of the Internship Report, their attendance and performance at work.

Among others the objective of the internship program are as follows (Internship Programme Guide, 2012):

- To provide students an opportunity to gain practical experience under professional supervision in actual work situations

- To provide students an opportunity to develop leadership skills
- To supplement students' classroom experiences
- To assist students in understanding their own capabilities
- To assist students with future employment by providing professional experience, job contacts, personal references and other forms of assistance.

2.2. Research Objective

This study was conducted among four purposively selected interns from Taylor's Business School, Taylor's University. As literature on internship experiences among Malaysian university students is limited, this study will assist universities and companies in understanding and enhancing the internship experience.

The objectives of this study were to better understand the experiences that the students went through during their internship and to recommend ways in which the educational institution could further enhance this experience.

3. Methodology

In-depth interviews of four purposively selected students from a business school at a Malaysian private university constituted the primary data for this study. The participants had undergone their internship from January till late March of 2013 at various companies in the Klang Valley. The interviews were conducted by the authors. All interviews were conducted on the campus of this private university and were audio recorded with the participants consent. Three of the participants were chosen as they were supervised by the interviewers during their internship while another was chosen as he was taught by one of the interviewers. These participants were interviewed between 45 minutes to an hour in May 2013. The participants in this research are identified using pseudonyms. A brief background of the participants is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' background

Participant Pseudonym	Company/Industry
Klein	Consumer goods
James	Accounting
Tommy	Beauty care
Linda	Courier services

The interview protocol questions were adopted and modified based on the questionnaire developed by D'Abate, Youndt & Wenzel (2009).

4. Findings and discussion

In comparison with other studies, this research enables the participants to voice out their internship experience through an in-depth interview. This together with an understanding of anonymity allowed more richness in the data gathered.

From analyzing the interview transcriptions, three main themes emerged. The themes describe the participants experience during the internship at their respective companies. A selected sample of the participants responses are presented with verbatim quotations. The main themes uncovered from analyzing the data are presented as follows:

- Learning beyond the classroom

All four participants acknowledged that the internship enabled them to learn and extend their knowledge beyond the classroom.

Klein who interned at a fast moving consumer goods multinational corporation described the following:

“What we have learnt in the textbook is a very small part of what supply chain actually is. It is very vast. Supply chain is very complex, very comprehensive. This made me feel that what I learnt in the books is just the bare basics, very bare functions, compared to what is going on in the real world. What I learnt in class, all those theories are useful up to an extent, for e.g. warehousing, which is a part of supply chain. The thing is with the textbook, you know that warehousing is part of supply chain but you don’t know the operations in warehousing. You don’t know the different jobs that actually go behind warehousing. Warehousing is a very, very big picture, compared to you actually go into detail in practical”.

The participants mentioned that during the internship, they were able to learn more than what was available through their textbooks. James interned with one of the big four accounting firms and one of his duties was to interview a prominent business owner who was to receive an award at an award ceremony organised by the accounting firm. He spoke the following:

“Their success stories inspired me. These businessmen started from the bottom and have gained success today. It is really inspiring. These lessons cannot be found in the textbook”.

Similar sentiments were also shared by Tommy who was attached to a beauty care company. He mentioned:

“I’ve learnt to be independent at all times. The things that I’ve studied have limited application to what I’m doing in my internship which requires more specific knowledge and skills”.

James further added that the internship experience enabled him to learn about managing people. James was also tasked to collate information from the building maintenance manager at his office. He initially faced difficulties in gathering the information but managed to overcome it eventually. He spoke the following:

“The most valuable lessons are the ability to deal with various people in different ways. I was determined to get the information from him and would not let him go. The whole experience made me felt good as I managed to crack him. This is a good thing for me to manage different people at different levels”.

Another participant, Linda who was attached to a courier service company verbalized the following:

“I learnt public speaking, presentation skills. The way we did in class and here were different. In class I just did it but I did not know there was proper conduct like hairstyle or tone of voice. He (immediate supervisor) raised the bar on how I should act in a professional level. He trained me on public speaking, writing. We had to write articles for the company like its newsletters. I had never done it before. He also taught me punctuality. In lecture, if you were late, it was ok but here we had to punch in, so we would punch in at 8:30am, if I punched at 8:32am, I thought it was ok but he said no. 3 times late, you would receive a warning letter”.

The internship made both Linda and Tommy realized that the expectations at work were higher than when they were studying. Tommy narrated the following experience:

“I was supposed to present to my manager and supervisor on my findings on the Taiwan skin care industry and I requested to propose a mode of entry into the market. The feedback given on my findings initially was rather disappointing as they were expecting more in-depth result. This is when I realised the difference in expectation given by a lecturer from an assignment and real life working scenario. I was thankful to be given a second opportunity to improve on my findings”.

Theoretical knowledge learned in the classroom may not entirely be sufficient and useful in practice. D’Abate, Youndt & Wenzel (2009) commented that the inclusion of cases, exercises and simulations in classrooms cannot completely replicate the complexities of real world business problem analysis and solving. A well designed

internship will put students into action learning situations which enable them to put to practice the theories and knowledge from the classroom. At the same time, these situations will help build their work related skills, familiarize themselves to business operations and the practical world of industry.

- Task significance

The participants opined that most of the tasks they were entrusted upon added value towards their internship experience. A structured and significant task enhanced the experience gained by these interns as described below.

James had the opportunity to work in three different departments namely Marketing & Communication, Advisory and Corporate Restructuring. He described the tasks at Marketing & Communication Department as follows:

“In Marketing Department I was very actively involved in the Youth to Business Forum. This was held in early Feb at Taylor’s Lakeside campus. We had to run business games among AIESEC members throughout Malaysia. The firm took 120 students. I actually came out with a business game for these students. The Youth to Business Forum, I pretty much prepared the whole business games together with the brief outline on how the games run”.

“I was responsible in dealing with the firm’s building management. We are the anchor tenant. I dealt with the Building Manager to get information on the amount of building space & diesel usage for the generators in the building. The experience was not easy as the Building Manager was reluctant initially to divulge the information. I had to explain to him the actual truth that the firm’s Global Office in London requires the information for the carbon footprint report. The building manager is of the view that the Mat Sallehs are forcing their values onto us. I slowly explained to him that we just wanted to know how we can reduce the damage on our planet”.

While at the Advisory Department, James worked with a 5-member consulting team on a feasibility study for a branch campus of a foreign university. He shared:

“I gained a lot of insight in setting up a university. I learnt a lot from the research I had to do. That helped me a lot. The firm has an internal database. You need to have a certain skill and ability to search on proper information from this data base”.

At the Corporate Restructuring Department, he voiced the following:

“The firm was engaged to restructure 1 Malaysia Development Bhd (IMDB). I played a supporting role in getting data, preparing slides & presenting our findings to IMDB”.

James further emphasized the experiences he gained in the various tasks by making this statement:

“I felt that I gained a much more enriching experience. By being involved in the projects, it gave me the whole picture of what the entire company is about”.

Tommy who was assigned to the Online Marketing department, shared his experiences within this department as follows:

“I was given the assignment of understanding the company's products with its features. Subsequently, I was honoured to be entrusted with the job of market research and analysis on Taiwan's skincare industry. The task of researching was on the import legislation and documents required to import from United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, Thailand & Taiwan. After the Chinese New Year break, I was assigned with the tasks of posting contents on our various Facebook local pages and to do a keyword research. I was in-charged on posting contents to

Indonesia & Thailand Facebook local pages on alternate day basis. The scope I had to cover would be on skin care tips, latest activities & promotions, current trends and sales campaign”.

“My supervisor had also asked me to assist her to look for 100 Taiwanese social medium that she could approach for the purpose of sending them our product for trials. I agreed immediately and assured her that she got the right person for the job. As usual, I managed to get it done on time and I was highly looked up by the department since then. As the end of internship approaches, I was given a final task which is to propose and implement a 2 weeks marketing campaign for the United States market. Other than ensuring the campaign is running as planned and answering to enquiries from customers, my job includes meeting potential customers of this campaign through various platforms. Instagram, Pinterest, email blasting to existing customers, Facebook fan page & Facebook cost-per-mille (CPM) were utilised to ensure maximum reach with minimum cost”.

Linda who underwent a job rotation while interning felt the following:

“For my experience, it was a bit unique because we did job rotations. The departments that were rotated were HR, sales and marketing, customer services, express department, operations and accounts. In Sales and Marketing, I learnt how to talk to potential clients, how to approach them and how to tell them about the company's services. It was very hard for me because I had to physically go out there or call and talk to them on the phone and it could be intimidating, but I learned better communications skills. I was there for 2 weeks”.

“I was only a week in Employee Relations, here I learned how to talk to employees regarding their problems since this is under HR. I had to write warning letters for late comers and people who forged their MC. It was hard to tell on some employees but I learned to be firm and fair. While at Customer Services, I had to deal with customer problems such as missing goods, lost items, damaged items. Here is where I learned how to have quick solving skills simply because I had to take customer complaints. It was very tough. All customer services parts were tougher than other areas because the customers were somewhat rude sometimes”.

“I was in the Operations department for 2 weeks and it was mostly customer service, I had to pick up phone calls and place pick up orders of packages and parcels for customers. Again, it was very difficult for the same reasons as mentioned earlier. Subsequently, I moved to Training and Recruitment. This department deals with training employees with orientations and workshops. Here I had to help the head of the department plan an Excel Workshop for employees at their office at Midvalley mall. I quite enjoyed it because I had to deal with finding the space for the orientation, arranging how many people are going etc and I thought it was very easy and fun and I even attended the workshop. I was here for 2 weeks”.

On the other hand, Klein who was assigned to the Business Excellence team which provides support to the Supply Chain Department shared:

“My job as an intern was just to assist my boss, I was directly below him. I did not really have a huge task that contributes directly to the company. I was appointed to update the intranet, The tasks did require a certain amount of thinking. I have never done anything like that before. It was eye opening. Updating the intranet was constant throughout the 3 months. They put me in charge of the thing for 3 months. Whenever there are any events, the intranet needs to be updated”.

“I was allowed and encouraged to make decisions during my internship. Part of my job involved data analysis. I was given raw data, which was just pure numbers, you do not see information. My job was to transform these raw data into information. I was given the autonomy as in what is the best way to present it”.

However, Klein commented the following on the responsibilities he was given during the internship:

“I will never tell my boss but I feel that I was under-utilised. There was more capacity within me. I could actually have done more. I felt on certain days that I was bored”.

Rothman (2007) found that expectations around challenging assignments completed within the given reasonable time frame and on-going feedback could improve internship effectiveness. Tommy, Linda and James acknowledged that the job rotation and challenging tasks placed upon them enriched their internship experiences. Klein on the other hand felt that he could have done more during the internship rather than updating the intranet.

- Positive supervisory, co-worker and university support

Overall, the participants were satisfied with the support provided by their immediate supervisors and co-workers and also the assistance given by the university.

Klein explained the following with regards to his immediate supervisor and co-workers:

“My supervisor is a very nice man. He is very patient. He is very busy. He makes the point to take me out for lunch, asked me how I was doing. There were opportunities for me to ask him questions, these sorts of interactions. I thought I was lucky to have a supervisor like that. I had very nice colleagues. There was almost an age gap as I was the youngest there, they are all in their thirties. But the way they interact, during lunch, they just accepted me as one of the gang”.

James shared the following:

“The environment at work was very open. We were given the freedom in how the work gets done. We were given our own notebook at Advisory. We could work anywhere on the 17th floor. At Marketing Dept I was treated as an equal. Whenever I had to work late, my supervisors will allow me to come in slightly later the following day. I had the opportunity to work with individuals who had vast experience”.

Linda’s experience with her colleagues is as follows:

“My colleagues were ok. It depends on the department. HR mostly young girls, marketing mostly older, more experienced people”.

In terms of support provided by the university, Tommy, James and Linda had the following views respectively:

“My overall experience with the Career Services Department has been satisfactory. I appreciate the briefings given before the internship on graduate qualities”.

“Career Services did a good job in preparing us for the internship”.

“Overall Career Services has done a great job in preparing students for the internship”.

Klein also expressed his positive view on the support provided by the university. He said,

“Student career services helped me very much before I actually went for the internship. They had courses, effective resume writing. Workshops for all the students. An officer there was very helpful. She was the one who introduced me to the company. We had the career fair and she introduced me to one of the HR people from the company. She assisted me in writing my resume. I sent my resume to her, she showed me how to improve it and make it better. She did a lot for me”.

In her studies, Rothman (2007) suggested that mentoring and respectful treatment at work could enhance the internship experience. With these positive experiences, the interns will either want to continue working for the companies after graduation or will also recommend the companies for future internship programs. James sums this up succinctly as follows:

“I would very highly recommend this company for future internship programmes as I am certain that the insights I had gained from the company would definitely benefit myself and also any student who is about to enter the working world by preparing them for such an event. Such a company would be a good ground to test a student's ability to think critically, analytically and also exhibit decent communication skills, which are all characteristics universities are trying to encourage students to possess and develop. The company also implements worldwide standards in their policies which pushes employees to perform in a dynamic environment. To sum it up, if a student is able to meet all the demands of working in an environment such as the one in the company, it would be safe to say that he/she would fare well in the working world”.

4.1. Overall experience and suggestions

The internship certainly provided the participants insights into the working world. They experienced first-hand the challenges of managing themselves, the work itself and their co-workers. All four participants were satisfied with their internship. They offered the following:

Overall it was a very pleasant experience. I am very happy with the internship and it definitely met my expectations. (Klein)

This is a very valuable experience. The internship overall exceeded my expectation as I only expected to know what a professional services does. My only expectation was to find out what it was all about. (James)

Overall the internship met my expectation I wanted to see what the real working environment was like, it was very different, I thought it would not be a drastic difference. I got to interact with people from all walks of life. (Linda)

The participants in this study also provided some suggestion towards improving the internship program. Upon completion of the internship, students are to prepare an internship report and submit a softcopy online to the university. Klein commented:

“The other thing is the internship report. I had access to the intranet. There was so much information that would be so interesting for me to share. But with some companies there were legal issues involved. If the internship report is to be published online, they want to make sure that the direction is correct. They do not want any incorrect statements, that sort of things. If we were actually submitting a hard copy, it would have been more interesting, we could have put in more information that would be fun”.

Currently, the internship forms part of the students' final year project. James offered this:

“The university should continue with this internship. The internship could be a subject on its own”.

As James was involved in several projects and benefited from it, he opined:

“I would highly suggest that students who goes through an internship be involved in the companies projects. However, there are interns who are not willing to be on project basis”.

Tommy on the other hand felt that the duration of the internship should be lengthened. He said:

“I think the 3 months internship is rather short, and 6 months would be ideal to have a better understanding on the work”.

5. Limitation and future research

The findings in this study are limited to only this particular private university and are limited in its ability to be generalized. Despite this, the understanding of the lived experiences of the participants will enrich the research area of business undergraduate internship.

The interviews with the four participants were conducted after the completion of their internship. More insights may be obtained if interviews were also conducted prior to the internship. In this way, the interns' expectations and possible thoughts on the outcome of their internship can be compared and analysed.

This study was conducted among participants who underwent a pleasant internship experience. It would be interesting to also understand the views of students who were not satisfied with their overall internship. The opinions of business undergraduates from other private and public universities in Malaysia could also be sought to add more depth in understanding their internship experiences.

A quantitative study can be employed for the purpose of generalization. Further research could be conducted to determine for example the main factors that will influence students' satisfaction with their internship.

6. Conclusion

In general, it can be concluded that the four interns benefitted from their internship experience. All of them believed that what they learnt during the internship exceeded their learning in the classroom. They were able to see 'the bigger picture' and develop their presentation and people skills. Apart from that, they also learnt to be more independent. All these learning were made possible through the variety of tasks and responsibilities given to the interns throughout the duration of the 10-week internship.

As the business environment is getting more demanding, employers would tend to hire employees that can quickly adapt to the work environment and learn on their job in the shortest possible time. Internship programs offer employers with a pool of candidates that have undergone some form of exposure in their respective work areas. This benefit the companies as lesser training will be required for these interns if they were to be hired. Most importantly these interns had the opportunity to understand the work culture during the internship and thus could easily assimilate with their other co-workers should they be recruited as permanent employees.

In addition, given that the internship is only for a short duration of time, both the university and host companies must draw up a meaningful and structured internship program to maximize the potential learning experience for the intern. It is also crucial that they are given tasks which challenge them to optimise learning. A carefully thought out program for the duration of the internship together with a set of learning achievements should be made known to the interns. These will certainly make the interns and companies aware of the expectations of the internship. The support extended to them by the company supervisors, co-workers and the university is deemed to be vital. This will ensure that the interns would be properly guided by both the educational institution and the workplace in order to have a more meaningful internship experiences.

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