

Towards Academic Internship Relevance: A Closer Look at the Perspectives of Supervisors and Students

Kanos Matyokurehwa (Corresponding Author)

Botho University, P O Box 501564, Gaborone, Botswana

Email: kanosmatyo@gmail.com

Isaac Madziva

Botho University, P O Box 501564, Gaborone, Botswana

Email: isaac.madziva@bothouniversity.ac.bw

Kendra Makoni

Botho University, P O Box 501564, Gaborone, Botswana

Email: kendra.makoni@bothouniversity.ac.bw

Received: August 29, 2017 Accepted: September 29, 2017 Published: October 9, 2017

doi:10.5296/jebi.v4i2.11971 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5296/jebi.v4i2.11971>

Abstract

The paper sought to establish the perspectives of the supervisors and the pre-final students' feedback after the pre-final students had completed their academic internship to make academic internship relevant. The research was carried out at a University in Botswana. The research utilized the mixed methods approach focusing on pre-final students from the Gaborone campus in the faculty of computing. A sample of 96 students and 36 internship company supervisors were selected. The research findings showed that both the students and internship supervisors felt that the academic internship is very useful but however they are some key issues that should be addressed for the academic internship to be a success. The key issues should be addressed by the three stakeholders namely the student, the internship supervisor and the training institution in order to make the academic internship a success.

Keywords: Academic Internship; Internship Supervisor; Training Institution; Student and Feedback

1. Introduction

Academic internship is a supervised work experience for a student that integrates work experience with what the student has learnt in school, the real world work exposure develops the student's skills and their appreciation of the work place (Gerken et al., 2012). Robinson et al (2011) defined academic internship as a pre-professional preparation for the student, which gives them an overview of what is expected from their profession. Maertz et al. (2014) defined the academic internship as a bridge that connects the theory learnt in classrooms and the practical skills in the real work environment. The academic internship in this context refers to supervised internship for a student before they graduate for a stipulated period of time. Many institutions of higher learning have developed their curricula to include the academic internship as a component that should be assessed and could run for a semester and in some cases for a year (Hergert, 2011). During the academic internship, the student will be supervised by an experienced supervisor at the company at which the student will be attached to, so that the student can get exposure to the real work experience in their profession. Students benefit immensely from the academic internship as they get hands on practical experience that may not be provided at their institutions (Hergert, 2011).

According to O'Neill (2010) feedback during and after the internship is very helpful to the student, company supervisor and the training institution at large. The feedback on what students and company supervisors say after the academic internship can help to re-align the relevance of curricula to the industry needs. However, many institutions of higher learning are paying a deaf ear to what the students and the company supervisors say after the internship period as some institutions do not visit students during the internship period to interact with their company supervisors in order to identify areas of improvement to meet the industry needs.

The research will be guided by the following research questions:

- What are the issues that are being raised by the company supervisors and the students concerning the academic internship?
- Are students finding the academic internship useful in line with their field of study?
- What are the key issues that should be acted upon by the students, the companies attaching students and the institution to make the academic internship a success?

2. Literature Review

Academic internships have proffered students with practical skills during the internship period but however most institutions programs are disconnected to the real needs of the industry (O'Neill, 2010). There is need to align the institutions programs with the demands of the industry and this can be achieved by implementing the feedback obtained from supervisors and students after the completion of the academic internship. Most researches on internships focus on student's learning outcomes but few researches were focused on implementing feedback received from students and supervisors to improve the relevance of the programs offered at institutions (Narayanan et al., 2010). Relevance of programs offered

by an institution of higher learning can only be ameliorated by taking into consideration the needs of the industry. The business world is changing expeditiously, so there is great need to align the curricula to the current market demands otherwise the programs offered in the institutions will be obsolete. What used to be in fashion ten years ago has drastically changed; the academic world is not spared from that muddle. Put in simple terms, the needs of the students and the industry are ceaselessly changing so the programs proffered should be market driven. The experience amassed by the students during the internship period will succor the students in acquiring the job specific skills in line with their study area and surge their level of productivity in their future jobs (Klein & Weiss, 2011). Knouse and Fontenot (2008) pointed out that students find internship rewarding because they will be given exigent tasks, incessant feedback from their supervisors and the exposure to different sections within the company.

Institutions of higher learning boon significantly from the internship program because there is a need to undertake modern experimental learning which is arduous to do at the campus but can be done at companies (Maertz et al., 2014). The formal assessment provided by the academic internship succor in accreditation processes as evidence and the feedback received after the internship can go a long way in revamping the classroom curricula (Maertz et al., 2014). The academic internship will assist the institutions by precluding the reality shock experienced by students when they gradually move from the institution to the work place without being exposed to the internship before (Mihail, 2006). Many prospective employers use academic internship as a yardstick to hire potential employees, this augments the job prospects for institutions that have internship programs in their curricula (Cook et al., 2004; Maertz et al., 2014).

Companies benefit most with the academic internships because they get inexpensive labour force to perform less costly routine tasks (Verney et al., 2009). When a company hires an employee who did internship before, the cost of training that new employee will be lower as compared to training an employee who has not done internship before (Verney et al., 2009). Gratified students with a particular company during their internship will speak highly of the company to their friends at the campus and this builds a good reputation of the company to prospective employees in future (Pianko, 1996; Verney et al., 2009). The company will benefit significantly with the new notions infused by the students engaged during the attachment period (Svotwa & Rudhumbu, 2014).

Effective internship programs should be enhanced by paying an attentive ear to what the students and supervisors say so that institutions can make conspicuous changes to their curricula in line with the industry needs (Muhamad et al., 2009). The academic internship is a three way communication process with the following key stakeholders involved; the institution that dispatch students for the academic internship; the company that superintends student mentoring to acquire the relevant skills needed in their field of study and the student who should do the internship for the stipulated time frame (McDonough et al., 2009). For the communication process to work efficaciously, the three stakeholders should proffer each other feedback about the internship process so that vital updates can be amended in the internship program. The vital updates in the internship program can only be done by the

institution after getting feedback from the company and the student.

Benson (2013) highlighted the importance of student's contentment with the internship program as another key indicator of the effectiveness of the internship. The student's contentment with the internship program can only be achieved if their presuppositions with the internship program are met; otherwise they will be low-spirited, however most internship programs proffer students the platform to provide their feedback after the internship. The feedback should be acted by the institution to ameliorate the internship program so that the students will find the internship helpful.

3. Research Methodology

The research methodology section will look at the research settings for the study, the research approach adopted for this study, the sampling techniques employed and the data analysis together with the discussions on the findings.

3.1 Research Setting

The research is based on Botho University in Botswana; the university has got 5 faculties. All the faculties dispatch students for internship when the students are in their pre-final year; the average duration of the internship is one semester that which runs for 16 weeks. During the internship, the students will be visited twice by an internship tutor from the university who will be communicating with the internship company supervisor where the student will be doing the internship. At each visit the student will be graded by the internship company supervisor based on their performance during the internship. At the end of the internship, the student will submit a report of the work they were doing during the internship to the internship tutor. When the internship is over, the student and the company supervisor will provide their feedback about the internship program through a questionnaire that will be send to them through their emails.

3.2 Research Approach

The research employed a mixed methods research approach because of its rich in-depth analysis of the required data to address our research objectives (Venkatesh et al, 2013). The instrument used was an open ended questionnaire which was administered electronically using the participants email addresses. The open ended questionnaire was used so that the opinions of the participants were not influenced by the questions posed by the researcher (Reja et al, 2003; Chenail, 2011). The research focused on students from the faculty of computing who had just completed their academic internship from July to November 2016.

3.3 Sampling Techniques and the Research Study Group

Levin et al. (2011) defined the study group as composed of the individuals in whom the research is centered upon. In our research the population consisted of all the students from the faculty of computing and all the supervisors who were supervising the students during the internship. The computing students were selected so that the findings obtained from the research can speak specifically to the faculty and any changes that may need to be done should be applied to the computing curriculum. The study group consisted of 270 students

from the Gaborone campus and 80 internship company supervisors. A sample of 96 students and 36 internship company supervisors were selected. Though it is not feasible to cover the entire population, however the sample chosen should significantly represent the entire population (Marshall, 1996). The study employed the purposive sampling technique which advocates for the selection of cases that fulfil a specific task (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2003). The purposive sampling focused on the pre-final students who had done their internship from July to November 2016 and had completed their internship period. The faculty of computing is comprised of three degree programs; Bachelor of Science (Hons) in Mobile Computing, Bachelor of Science (Hons) in Network Security and Computer Forensics and Bachelor of Science (Hons) in Computing.

3.4 Results

The following section will discuss some of the responses from the students who participated in the study and after that we will discuss the responses from the internship company supervisors.

Table 1 show the feedback received from the students after their academic internship. The students rated their feedback using the following scales: 1 –Poor, 2- Fair, 3-Good, 4- Very Good and 5- Excellent.

Table 1. Student feedback after the academic internship

SN	Students' feedback traits	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Internship experience	4.3	0.78
2	Supervisor overall rating	4.1	1.00
3	Kind of tasks assigned	4.1	0.90
4	Supervisor's feedback quality	4.1	0.91
5	Profession exposure	4.2	0.80
6	The internship experience helped in clarifying my career goals	4.3	0.93
7	I acquired new skills and knowledge as a result of the internship	4.2	0.88
8	I am prepared to get into the work force as a result of this internship	4.4	0.82
	Mean of Means	4.2	0.9

The responses from the students' exhibit that the internship exposure boosted their confidence to enter into the job industry as can be seen by a high mean of 4.4 and a standard deviation of 0.82 telling us that the responses were not spread out from the mean. Students felt the internship experience was very valuable to their career goals as can be attested by a mean of 4.3 and with a standard deviation of 0.72 which signified similar responses. The students' responses were more spread out on the issue of the supervisor overall rating as can be seen with a standard deviation of 1 but with a mean score 4.1. The mean of means (4.2) for students' academic internship suggest that the academic internship is useful to the students.

We also looked at the responses per degree program but focusing on few selected traits. The students doing Bachelor of Science (Hons) in Mobile Computing using the skills acquired during the internship period had a mean of 4 and a standard deviation of 0.43. This shows that the students acquired valuable skills during the internship period and the responses were highly concentrated on the mean and that attest that they benefited much from the internship period. The students doing Bachelor of Science (Hons) in Network Security and Computer Forensics using the same trait had a mean of 4.8 and a standard deviation of 0.4. The mean is significantly high which means the students benefited by acquiring skills that are very relevant to their field of study and the standard deviation is showing that their responses were in congruency. The students doing Bachelor of Science (Hons) in Computing had a mean of 3.98 and a standard deviation of 0.73, this also shows the students benefited from the academic internship by acquiring new skills even though the mean is significantly lower as compared to other degree programs.

3.4.1 Open Ended Questions Analysis

Hsieh and Shannon (2005) argued that summative content analysis approach can enhance analysis of qualitative or open ended questions by commencing with the identification of certain words and quantifying those words in order to appreciate their contextual use. The word quantification we are not inferring any meaning to the words but however we want to express the usage of those words (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). The word identification and quantification are helpful in concepts building and structures that emerge from the data based on their frequency of occurrences (Jackson and Trochim, 2002). Elo and Kyngäs (2008) pointed out that the word analysis to check the frequency of usage will be referred to as manifest content analysis. The content analysis will help in reducing the data volumes but however will assist us focus on our research problem (Schreier, 2014:1). This is the approach that will be utilized in our research. We grouped the frequency of occurrences into clusters during our manifest content analysis.

3.4.2 What the Students Liked Most about the Internship Experience

Our manifest content analysis showed what the students liked the internship experience. The manifest content analysis identified 4 clusters from students' responses. Cluster 1, 55% of the responses showed that the students' internship experience enabled them to learn new things. Students were exposed to real working experience and the responses from cluster 2 were 46%. Cluster 3, which had 59% responses showed that the students enjoyed interaction with work colleagues which is paramount in aligning themselves with prospective employers

when they complete their studies. Cluster 4 identified that students acquired new skills and knowledge from the internship experience and the responses were 52%.

3.4.3 Feedback from Internship Company Supervisors

Table 2 shows the feedback received from the internship company supervisors after the students had completed their academic internship. The supervisors rated their feedback using the following scales: 1 –Poor, 2- Fair, 3-Good, 4- Very Good and 5- Excellent.

Table 2. Internship supervisor’s feedback

SN	Supervisors’ feedback traits	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Student knowledge	4.0	0.89
2	Attitude	4.2	0.82
3	Team work	4.2	0.83
4	Leadership qualities	3.5	0.70
5	Communication	3.8	0.96
6	Creativity	3.2	0.91
7	Punctuality	4.0	1.02
8	Adaptability to current trends/Technology	4.1	0.84
	Mean of Means	3.9	0.88

The student’s attitude and the team work had higher mean values of 4.2 and the standard deviations were almost the same at 0.82 and 0.83 respectively. This shows that the students exhibited good team work and attitude but however a lot needs to be done to groom the students to have leadership qualities and being creative by coming up with modules that can address that before they go for academic internship as this can be attested by low means of 3.5 and 3.3 respectively. The supervisors were impressed with the knowledge of students as can be seen with the mean of 4.0 and the standard deviation of 0.89. The mean of means (3.9) from the internship supervisors’ feedback suggest that the students performed well during the academic internship.

3.4.4 Would You Recommend a Botho University Graduate to Potential Employers?

All the supervisors said they would recommend a Botho university graduate to potential employers because of the performance they exhibited during the internship period. Cluster 1

identified that the supervisors were impressed with the hardworking nature of the students and the responses were 59%. One supervisor mentioned that “*The students are hardworking, creative, can be relied on, Knowledgeable in ICTs skills and has good team spirit*”.

Cluster 2 identified that the students are equipped with the skills and the knowledge required in performing activities assigned to them. Cluster 2 had 60% in responses. The supervisors generally were impressed with the performance of the students and they expressed that the students were willing to learn new things especially in the networking side which means the University needs to offer more practical oriented lectures to students in networking so that they go to their academic internship well equipped.

3.4.5 Skills the Students Were Expected Have during the Academic Internship

The manifest content analysis identified 2 clusters from the supervisors’ responses. Cluster 1 had 53% in responses and the supervisors expected the students to have some basic knowledge on troubleshooting. Cluster 2 had 58% in responses and identified that students they lack the skills to do network configurations.

3.4.6 Areas of Improvement for Botho Students

The manifest content analysis identified 2 clusters from the supervisors’ responses. Cluster 1 had 51% in responses and the supervisors felt the students were not very punctual when coming to work which they feel should be improved. The cluster 2 had 50% in responses and supervisors felt that most of the students lack the practical skills which needs to be improved especially they noted the issue of troubleshooting, networking configuration, programming and database design.

4. Discussion of Findings

The research findings is an eye opener to institutions of higher learning on what needs to be done to ameliorate the student, company and the training institution’s level of satisfaction with the internship program. Students expressed their profound gratitude with the internship experience which can be attested with a high mean in internship experience, professional exposure and skills acquired. However, the students felt that the companies and the training institution had a hand to play in making the academic internship a memorable experience as can be attested by students suggesting that companies should give them more challenging tasks and that the internship duration should be increased to one year to enable them to acquire more skills during the academic internship. Companies also felt that the training institution had a bigger role to play by impacting the practical skills in students before they enroll for the internship program. The training institution felt that the students need to take their studies seriously for them to excel in their internship program. Coco (2000) also raised the issue of synergies that will be created between the student, company and the training institution because of the academic internship because the internship will bring in mutual benefits to all the parties. The internship program will provide the student with an opportunity to get the right job because the student will be taking job responsibilities but under the guidance of well experienced supervisors (Coco, 2000). The academic internship will also open the students’ eyes on opportunities that exist in the working environment that

they can exploit and start their own businesses when they graduate from the university.

Henry et al. (2001) argued that the internship program is a “win- win” situation for the institution, student and the company because the students will acquire relevant skills in line with the field of study while the company will enjoy low costs in training the newly hired employee and the institution will be glad to produce employable graduates which makes their curricula relevant to the industry needs. For the internship program to be successful it is crucial for the institution to take into consideration the feedback from the students and the companies and align their curricula to address those concerns. The importance of taking feedback from the students and companies after the academic internship has received considerable academic attention with many authors calling for the implementation of feedback received to make the academic internship a success (Beard, 2007; Knouse & Fontenot, 2008; Alpert et al., 2009; Narayanan et al., 2010).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, our research identified some of the key issues raised by pre-final students and the internship company supervisors which could be acted by the training institution to make the academic internship a success. The research findings also apply to the other stakeholders who are the students and the internship companies who also have a hand in making the academic internship a success. Basing on our research findings, we propose the following recommendations to the three key stakeholders to proffer the academic internship a resounding success.

Stakeholder 1: The Training Institution

- i) To provide more practical oriented modules before students enroll for the academic internship program
- ii) To extend the duration of the academic internship program to one year
- iii) To align the degree programs in line with the needs of the industry

Stakeholder 2: Internship Company

- i) To give more challenging tasks to students during the academic internship

Stakeholder 3: Student

- i) To take the academic internship program seriously
- ii) To be punctual at work during the academic internship program
- iii) To do academic internship in companies that can enable them to acquire relevant skills

Acknowledgements

We would want to express our profound gratitude to Botho University for providing us with access to the feedback collected from the academic internship program; we would also want to thank the unknown reviewers for their valuable comments.

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