

DOES INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE BEGET ACADEMIC RELEVANCE AND EMPLOYMENT PROSPECTS: AN ASSESSMENT OF GRADUATE INTERNS FROM A NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract. Basically, the objective of internship programme is to expose students to the real world of work and in the process, provide feedback to institutions on the relevance or otherwise of the curriculum. This study therefore assessed the academic relevance of internship programme and employment prospect of graduate interns from Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Population of the descriptive study were graduate students in the Department of Educational Management of the university. A sample of 120 graduate students from 2012/2013, 2013/2014 and 2014/2015 academic sessions were randomly selected. The post internship semester results, a structured interview and a Likert scale type questionnaire were used in the study. The Cronbach alpha reliability test on the questionnaire showed 0.79 reliability index. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used at 5% level of significance. The study found that graduate students' participation in internship has impact on academic performance and also has a significance influence on employment prospect. It was recommended that internship should be geared to-

wards enhancing the knowledge, skills, attitude and personality of graduate students to prepare them in more holistic approach for employment.

Keywords: internship, interns, academics, employment, university

Introduction and background

Globally, employability has been changing from a static binary dimension defined as being qualified for a job or not, to a more dynamic and complex notion of employability as an interactive and adaptive dimension to obtain meaningful jobs throughout an individual's lifetime. In response to this change, higher education institutions (HEI) have been adapting their curricula to foster characteristics of employability in their graduates. One of such adaptation is an increased emphasis on experience-based learning through learning service, academic internship, practicum and job experience activities. This is because transition from life as a student to the world of work is not always easy and can bare a lot of difficulties. In this case, graduates have to apply their theoretical knowledge to a work-related context.

Academic internship as presented in several researches has only been studied from undergraduate perspective (Gomez et al., 2004; Reardon et al., 2008; Binder et al., 2015). Meanwhile graduate students in Nigeria also engage in the academic exercise. The exercise is done usually for minimum of six weeks between two semesters of one year postgraduate coursework session. This exercise is designed to expose graduate interns to professional experience in the work place. It is an opportunity to integrate work-related experience into graduate education by participating in scheduled and supervised work. It is the bridge between academics and the real world because it provides students with practical experience. These real-world experiences are an integral component of an academic program and provide students with the opportunity to develop not only work skills but also an understanding of the

workplace. Clearly, internship features prominently when it comes to the employability of graduates from higher education.

Often, it is assumed that graduates can directly transfer their cognitive knowledge to the workplace and use their acquired skills in their first job (Arts et al., 2006; Mintzberg, 2004). However, both research and practice indicate that this is often not the case and that graduates underperform when starting their first job (Arts et al., 2006; Tynjala, 2008; Adebakin, 2014). The transition can be eased when graduates have been pre-exposed to what they are getting into. Tynjala (2008) indicated that school learning should adopt certain features of work learning in order to integrate theory and practice. This integration can be done through mediating tools like academic internship.

Internships are work-based educational experiences that relate to specific jobs, positions, occupations or professions. They are career-oriented curricular endeavours of practical application. This practical activity is necessary to give students first hand skill development and knowledge which they cannot get within the confines of the classroom (Togara, 2013).

Objectives of internship are many and varied. Some of the common objectives include giving extra knowledge to students in the related areas of their studies; developing and enhancing the requisite skills for effective interpersonal and group work relations; personnel growth, maturity and independence (Mohd Jaffri et al., 2011). Thus, the overarching objective is to ensure that students are exposed to the real world of work and in the process providing feedback to institutions on the relevance or otherwise of the curriculum.

Internships provide benefits for students, employers and universities. Clearly students gain valuable work experience from an internship experience (Binder et al., 2015). Employers benefit from employing interns may include the opportunity to have the first choice of students to work with (Kysor & Piece, 2000). The internship programs create a stronger connection between university and the community (Weible, 2010). This relationship provides

feedback to the university on the application of the student's curriculum and thus helps in keeping curriculum current to the demands of industry.

Internship participation and academic relevance

Research efforts have showed that students improve their academic performance and students come back to the university after an internship with more motivation; participation in internship programs contribute to students' academic performance and the relationship between the two is a manifestation of support for programs of professional education as opposed to those promoting study for the sake of liberal education (Gomez et al., 2004; Blair, et. al., 2004; Binder et. al., 2015).

Internship has been found to motivate most students and has had a positive effect on their academic performance and graduation rates (Jackson & Wirt, 1996). Results from an evaluation of the Boeing Company's Summer Internship Program for juniors, seniors, and first year college students indicated that the internship motivated students to stay in school (Wang & Owens, 1995). In addition, a comprehensive review of trends and effects of paid employment among college students revealed that student employment has a positive correlation with academic performance as long as the job is closely related to career interests and aspirations (Stern & Nakata, 1991). Research has also has shown that brighter students, those with better grades, are more likely to get into an internship (Knouse & Fontenot, 2008).

The connection between the academic and internship experiences of students is multifaceted. Binder et al. (2015) tested the hypothesis that students improved academically, when measured by GPA, following participation in internship programs. Binder et al. (2015) looked at the cumulative GPA of students prior to their internship and then compared it to their cumulative GPA at graduation. They also analysed the students' GPA prior to an in-

ternship experience and at graduation. They concluded that students' grades in Nottingham Trent University improved following an internship experience.

Recent evidence demonstrates the relevance of the graduate level internship experience as recognized by graduate students. Wheeland & Palus (2010) found in an exit survey that 72% of MPA graduates over the previous decade believed their internships to be very relevant experiences. An additional 17% found them relevant. The primary link between the internships referenced in Nigeria and the Wheeland & Palus (2010) is that postgraduate programs require the internships and need not necessarily be provided incentives for participation.

In a survey conducted by the National Defence Research Institute¹⁾, it was indicated that there is a significant difference between public and private sectors on the emphasis they place on internships. It was also revealed that non-profit and government (public) sectors hire more co-op and part-time students than just summer interns with the reverse being true in private sectors (service and manufacturing industries). However, Brooks & Greene (2008) on public-private sector internships intimated their sample of firms that, for profit companies (private) offered an average of 55% of their summer interns permanent positions compared to only 5% for not-for-profit (public) companies. This suggests that the not-for-profit (government sectors) may be lagging the for-profit private sectors in effective use of summer internships as a recruiting tool.

Gomez et al. (2004) analysed graduate students on a bioscience degree over a two year period. They found those taking the optional Internship course performed significantly better than those following the normal, full-time degree in the final year. In addition, there was no significant difference between the performance of male and female Internship students in the final year following the year of Internship.

Internship experience and employment prospects

The benefits of internship participation extend beyond employer perceptions. In addition to linking theory to practice, another benefit of an internship may be a change in the significance students place on traits that are important to obtain post qualification professional employment (Green et al., 2011). By implication, internships can play an important role in helping students make good career choices. Studies have shown that students who participated in an internship have greater job stability in their early careers (Callanan & Benzing, 2004) and higher job satisfaction (Gault et al., 2010). Other studies have found that internships can make students more ambitious and can help ease the transition from school to work (Carter & Franta, 2005; Knouse et al., 2008). Students may therefore be motivated to seek out internship placement as a means for securing eventual permanent employment.

One way by which graduate students' employability could be geared is through experience-based learning, which requires students to use their experiences, capacities, previous knowledge, personal skills and personality attributes to solve work problems (Andresen et al., 2000). As a result, job related work experience has been identified by employers as being very important when recruiting graduates for entry-level employment (Reardon et al., 2008). Furthermore, with technological changes in the economy and corporate trends supporting downsizing and restructuring, many organisations actually use work integrated learning such as cooperative education, internships and part-time jobs to provide an economical way to screen, train, and develop potential full-time employees (Carter & Franta, 2005; Brooks & Greene, 2008). This implies that graduates with these work integrated learning experience start off knowing more about their jobs as they have practical experience and advantage over others that may not have undergone such work integrated learning.

Callanan & Benzing (2004) examined the relationship between the completion of an internship and use of the career centre for employment in a career-oriented job upon graduation. Results revealed a significant correlation between participation in an internship and employment in one's field upon graduation. The relationship between number of career centre visits and job placement, however, was not significant. Carter & Franta (2005) reported that organisations which place high level of investment in new employees also place stronger emphasis on the importance of pre-employment internships as a tool for recruitment and screening. Students who engage in several career related work experiences while in college, including internships, are able to secure employment more quickly after graduation, are more likely to be employed within their field of study, and are generally more satisfied in their current work positions than graduates with no career related experience (Kysor & Pierce, 2000).

Knouse et al. (2008) also compared the relationship between participation in an internship and subsequent job placement. They surveyed students at graduation and then six months later to examine the variables under study. At graduation, the researchers compared those who had participated in internships versus those who had not on variables such as G.P.A, age, and employment status. Six months post-graduation, Knouse et al. (2008) compared those two groups on job placement status. Results indicated that those who had participated in internships had a significantly higher G.P.A. and were more apt to be employed upon graduation than students without internships.

Methodology

The study was basically a descriptive survey research. Population for the study were graduate students in the Department of Educational Management, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. In order to obtain a good sample for the study, 40 students each were selected from 2012/2013, 2013/2014 and 2014/2015 academic sessions using the simple random sam-

pling technique. Therefore, a total of 120 graduate students formed the sample size for the study. Relevance and experience of internship programme on graduate students' academics was measured using the post internship semester results of the randomly selected interns. In other to corroborate the secondary data (post internship semester results), an interview was conducted on 30 randomly selected interns (among the sample) to know their opinion on the relevance of internship to their academic work. Direct supervisors of the interns from 30 organisations visited were purposively chosen to express their opinions on employment prospects of interns. A Likert scale type questionnaire was developed and used for data collection on employment prospects of interns. To ascertain the internal consistency of the instrument, Cronbach alpha reliability test was employed with an index of 0.79. The interview was recorded and formed the basis of the report therefrom. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) was used to analyse the main research question. In addition, hypotheses was analysed using the Chi-Square (χ^2) Statistics at the 5% level of significance.

Results

Interview report

Interview conducted in form of personal interactions with graduate students who had gone through internship programme confirmed that they were exposed to real work environment and this has widened their academic horizon. They confirmed that experience gathered on internship has a lot of impact on their academic performance and has improved not only their affective strength but also their cognitive abilities.

Research question

Does graduate students' participation in internship has any impact on their GPA for the semester following an internship compared to prior semester?

Table 1. Statistics of pre and post internship graduate students' performance

Semester	Session	N=120			t-Statistic
		\bar{X}	Sd	X-difference (Post-Pre)	
Pre-Internship	2012/2013	3.36	.63	-	2.45*
	2013/2014	3.33	.70	-	
	2014/2015	3.32	.71	-	
Post-Internship	2012/2013	3.43	.75	.07	
	2013/2014	3.41	.61	.08	
	2014/2015	3.39	.66	.07	
Weighted Average =3.37					
t-critical = 1.98, df= 118, $p \leq .05$					

Table 1 compared students' GPA for the two consecutive semesters between which internship took place. This test reduces student type bias as the same student fall in both pre and post groups. The mean differences (.07, .08, and .07) for the three sessions in this study showed that graduate students performed better academically in the post internship semester. It is also worthy of note that graduate students' performance in the pre-internship semesters were below the average mean score (3.37) for the three sessions while their post internship performance was above the average mean score. A further test of difference shows a significant difference between graduate students' performance in the semester following an internship compared to prior semester. This difference may be occasioned by students' ability to make the cognitive connections between what they had experienced in the workplace and classroom theory.

Research hypotheses

Internship programme has no significance influence on graduate students' employment prospect.

Table 2. Internship and employment prospect of interns

Prospect	Type of Organisation				Total
	Education		Non-Education		
	Public	Private	Public	Private	
High	13	9	3	-	25
Low	2	1	1	-	5
Total	41	20	12	2	30

$\chi^2_{\text{Computed}} = 24.21, \chi^2_{\text{Critical}} = 7.82, df = 3, p \leq .05$

Table 2 shows a significant influence of internship programme on graduate students' employment prospect. Since χ^2 computed value was found to be greater than χ^2 critical value ($\chi^2 = 24.21 > 7.82$) at 0.05 alpha level with a degree of freedom of 3, the null hypothesis was rejected. However, respondents' view on the prospect of internship programme is on the high side in the public sector than the private sector.

Discussion

This study revealed that graduate students' participation in internship has impact on their academics when comparing the pre and post internship performance. Knouse et al. (2008) in a similar study also found that student who had participated in internships had a significantly higher CGPA. In a survey carried out by Wheeland & Palus (2010), they found that 72% of MPA graduates over the previous decade believed their internships to be very relevant experiences. Binder et al. (2015) reported an improved students grades following an internship experience. In another study, Gomez, et. al. (2004) found those taking the optional internship course performed significantly better than those following the normal, full-time degree in the final year. Contrary to the findings of this study, Gomez et al. (2004) further revealed no significant difference between the performance of male and female interns in the final year following the year of internship.

This study found that internship programme has a significance influence on graduate students' employment prospect. This corroborate with Carter

& Franta (2005); Knouse et al. (2008) who separately found that internships can make students more ambitious and can help ease the transition from school to work. The study carried out by Reardon et al. (2008) also revealed that employers identified job related work experience as very important when recruiting graduates for entry-level employment. Callanan & Benzing (2004) in another study found a significant correlation between participation in an internship and employment in one's field upon graduation. Carter & Franta (2005) reported that organisations which place high level of investment in new employees also place stronger emphasis on the importance of pre-employment internships as a tool for recruitment and screening. Studies have however concluded that students who participated in an internship have greater job stability in their early careers (Callanan & Benzing, 2004) and higher job satisfaction (Gault, et. al., 2010).

It was also observed in this study that prospect of internship programme is on the high side in the public sector than the private sector. This corresponds with National Defence Research Institute¹⁾ assertion that public organisations have the rationale in offering attachments as part of the academic programmes to the students through gaining experience and exposure. The institute underscores improvements in career-related direction as well as gaining practical experience. The foregoing though provides a strong argument for public sector contribution to the relevance of internship; Brooks & Greene (2008) on public-private sector internships intimated the opposite. The results of their study revealed (private) organizations offered an average of 55% of their summer interns permanent positions compared to only 5% for not-for-profit (public) companies. This suggests that the public sectors may be lagging the private sectors in effective use of internships as a recruiting tool and place stronger emphasis on the importance of pre-employment internships as a tool for recruitment and screening.

Conclusion

Internship is an important part of the university curriculum which plays a crucial role of helping graduate students to make the connections between their traditional coursework and the workplace. The perceived value of the internship is also related to the pedagogical approach and the demographic profile of the students. The value of the internship will be maximized if educational managers and curriculum planners as well can provide the appropriate structure and integrate the experience with the academic background of the students. This approach will help to address the criticisms of graduates as being overly theoretical and abstract. It is important therefore to state that without objectives and assessment initiatives, the credibility of an internship can be compromised. Therefore any successful internship programme should have a comprehensive assessment in ways that allow for the interns to be reflective of their experiences.

Recommendations

(A) Regular update of course syllabus by providing industrial exposure, training and seminars and continuously implement the outcomes based curriculum; (B) The proposed training plan may be implemented to enhance the knowledge, skills, attitude and personality of the students to prepare them in more holistic approach for employment; (C) The university should upgrade the quality of facilities and laboratories to continuously enhance knowledge and skills of the students necessary to have future work assignments.

NOTES

1. http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2004/RAND_MG138.pdf

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