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Using internship as a tool for professional development in universities: a case of the Zimbabwe Open University.

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Abstract

Skills transference through internship has been a major model used by higher education institutions to facilitate students' practical application of knowledge and principles to real life situations. Internship therefore, has been a central feature of the learning process in many professional training fields such as medicine, nursing, and law, to name some. The primary goal of internship is to develop practical expertise of the trainee. Currently, some employers are skeptical about employing Open Distance Learning (ODL) graduates assuming that they lack hands-on experience. ODL graduates are, therefore, sometimes disadvantaged during upgrading and promotion in some organizations. This study sought to establish how internship could be applied as a tool for professional development for Open Distance Learning students. Adopting a qualitative methodology, the study employed a case study research design. An interview schedule was used to gather information from a purposively selected sample of fifteen students from the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences in six selected Regional Campuses of the Zimbabwe Open University. The study focused on students in the Master of Science in Counselling and Master of Science in Special Education degree programmes, who had completed or were still under internship with various organisations. Data were analysed using themes that emerged from the findings. It emerged that internship critically facilitates students to cope with varied assignments, learn to be creative and get highly motivated, and thus help improving use of counselling techniques. It also helped students gain knowledge on support systems for different cases for people with disabilities. One of the recommendations was that the university should strengthen internship programmes through enhanced supervisory visits to the internship sites and increase the number of internship hours.

Key words: Internship; professional development; Open and Distance Learning

INTRODUCTION

The transference of skills to students through internship reflects a chief model used by higher education institutions to facilitate students' practical application of knowledge and principles to real life situations. Work-based learning, whether in the form of an internship or apprenticeship, is currently one of the most influential ideas in public higher education and workforce development policy (Hora, Wolfgram, & Thompson, 2017). Similarly, Cohen (2014) notes that it is increasingly clear that internships with industrial, non-profit, or governmental organisations are valuable experiences for both the student and the hosting organisation. Internships are work-based educational experiences that relate to specific jobs, positions, occupations or professions (Merrit, 2008). Internship therefore, has been a central feature of the learning process in many professional training fields such as medicine, nursing, law, counselling, disability studies, social work and many