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

Lilian Chaminuka and Justina Z Mtezo
Zimbabwe Open University

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

others. The primary goal of internship is to develop the practical expertise of the trainee.

There have been concerns raised by industry in relation to the role of universities in preparing graduates for success in their careers. Similarly, there is a misconception that ODL graduates lack hands-on experience in their areas of training. As a result, some employers are skeptical about employing ODL graduates thus disadvantaging them before and during employment, as well as upgrading and promotions in some organisations. However, it is important to note that some of the ODL graduates have a lot of relevant experience since most of them are already employed in their fields of specialisation. Such a scenario, therefore, accentuates the central role of internship in ODL institutions. Consequently, this article considers internship as an avenue for establishing the development of management competencies while conversely being utilised to determine possible deficits in students' professional development and marketability. The study therefore sought to establish how internship could be applied as a tool for professional development for Open and Distance Learning (ODL) students in Zimbabwe focusing on the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) experience.

STUDY BACKGROUND

According to Lee (2016), it is estimated that there are approximately fifty-two million interns at any one time globally, with 97% of large employers planning to hire interns each year. This stems from the backdrop that experience is the best teacher; hence, it is the major motivation for the majority of university and graduate students to take up internships. Despite the view that some university programmes oblige students to take internships, other valiant students are aware of the fact that the greatest way to put together pertinent work experience on their resume is internship. At the same time, internship can facilitate one to obtain a prospective role at a reputable company. For Merrit (2008), there is a significant belief among organisations that interns are a low cost resource. However, research by the Association of Graduate Recruiters has indicated that those graduates who assumed their professions as interns are more likely to remain within the company that they were with during their internship for an elongated period compared to those who did not.

There is a growing number of students taking internships with a view to building their professional experience. In the light of this, it has become even more fundamental for organisations looking to attract and host the best interns to uphold and offer the best intern experience (Chow & Lam, 2015). However, the support expected from the company to the interns is changing, making it imperative for companies to stay ahead of the game (Lee, 2016). Therefore, a significant amount of coordination and employee support goes into managing interns in a short space of time. What this points to is the creation and institutionalisation of suitable policies, processes, people and technology in to attract the best as well as to minimise organisational costs.

In Zimbabwe, the most prominent ODL institution is the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). According to Bukaliya (2012) ZOU was established to cater for a substantial component of people who, by design or unintentionally, could not be accommodated in conventional universities, by offering them the opportunity to study in their homes and in their workplaces through distance education. Chiefly, Government through an Act of Parliament in 1993 instituted ZOU. At its inception, the University had one faculty, the Faculty of Education. As a university, ZOU now offers a range of undergraduate diploma and degree

programmes, Masters and Doctor of Philosophy degrees in six faculties, which are; Applied Social Sciences, Arts and Education, Facullty of Agriculture, Commerce and Law, Science and Technology and Information Technology and Multi-media Communication. Interestingly and most significantly, ZOU has a decentralised structure as reflected by the existence of Regional Campuses in all the ten (10) administrative provinces of Zimbabwe and a Virtual Campus to cater for all global students.

In terms of internship, three out of the six faculties do offer this facility. According to Bukaliya (2012) in the Applied Social Sciences, internships are offered in the Bachelor of Science degree in Counselling and the Master of Science in Counselling while the Faculty of Arts and Education, through the Department of Education, offers internships in a different form that is, teaching practice and attachment for Media Studies students. The teaching practice is offered under the Diploma in Education (both primary and secondary) and Bachelor of Education (secondary) programmes respectively. Internships are also offered in the Faculty of Science and Technology in the Physical Education and Sport programme. The establishment of internship programmes in the ODL institution was premised upon the recognition that there was a gap in the learning of their students, in as far as practical appreciation of skills was concerned. This thus, adds credence to the notion that internship is of utmost importance to the different degree and diploma programmes in which students are enrolled. Nevertheless, despite such noble intentions in the introduction of internship programmes in ODL, there are some few challenges that negatively affect its implementation across all faculties offering the facility. Against such a background, the study sought to assess the role of internship in developing students professionally in ODL institutions with a particular focus on the ZOU experience.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Based on the given background there is a theoretical framework that informs this study. The study adopts John Dewey's theory of experiential learning. This study honors the fact that Dewey's philosophy combines a person's community service and academic study to produce a rich learning experience that benefits the learner and the community at large, which promotes mindfulness and positive focus on a career (Pacho, 2015). The philosophy of experience and learning is profound for this particular study because it brings to the fore one's social responsibility during service-learning. In other words, internship for ZOU students and other ODL students is most crucial, as it is a chance to acquire hands-on practice, which is required in the industry, adds onto individual growth. Hence, the guidance this study acquired from the Dewey's Experiential Learning theory.

THE CONCEPT OF INTERNSHIP

Before examining the role of internships in the professional development of students, it merits to consider and articulate what is meant by internship. Nevertheless, we have to be quick to point out that examined literature makes it apparent there is no single definition in existence and in practice that is finite. Internships assume many diverse forms, hence the varied definitions.

According to Beck and Halim (2008), "internships are considered as a valuable learning experience for students, academics and prospective employers." This implies that students are able to gain experience in real working environment and applying what they have learnt in classroom. Taylor (1988) defined internships as "structured and career relevant work experiences obtained by students prior to graduation from an

academic program." In the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, an intern is defined as "an advanced student or graduate usually in a professional field (such as medicine or teaching) gaining supervised practical experience (as in a hospital or classroom)." This definition considers what is known as practicum (in nursing) or teaching practice (in education) as internships, along with the view that the experience is supervised and limited to advanced students (Hora et al., 2017). On the other hand, the Oxford English Dictionary defines internship as, "The position of a student or trainee who works in an organisation, sometimes without pay, in order to gain work experience or satisfy requirements for a qualification." From this definition, it can be gleaned that the learner is a beginner and is viewed as employee of an organisation. It also makes reference to the subject of pay (or lack thereof), and the goal of obtaining qualifications.

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (2011) defined internship as a form of experiential learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skills development in a professional setting. They further posit that internships present students with the opportunity to gain valuable applied experience and make connections in professional fields they are considering for career paths; and give employers the opportunity to guide and evaluate talent (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2011). Similarly, Merrit (2008) argues that internships are career-oriented curricular endeavors of practical application.

In the light of the foregoing Hora et al. (2017) posit that the central idea behind the advocacy for work-based learning is that hands-on experiences in authentic, real-world contexts are an important complement to academic programmes and classroom teaching – an idea that has been expressed by educational researchers and learning scientists for decades. Internships, in particular, are often touted as being a win-win situation: Students can get real-world job experience and establish professional networks, educators get their students opportunities to translate theory into practice, and employers get inexpensive and educated workers that may turn into new hires (Hora et al., 2017). Furthermore, internships are largely viewed as a vital strategy in solving the so-called "skills gap."

A number of terms have been developed over the years to denote internship (Hora et al., 2017; Merrit, 2008). These encompass apprenticeship, authentic Assessment, coop, which is short for cooperative education, experiential education, experiential learning and externship, which is a short-duration, less extensive version of an internship in which a student becomes actively engaged and participates in applied, practical, experience-based learning in an area or field of interest. Other terms include individualized learning, job shadowing, performance assessment, performance exhibition, portfolio assessment, school-to-work programmes, and service-learning, which denote the hands-on educational approach that combines service to the community with the classroom curriculum (Merrit, 2008).

Historically, student internships (or cooperative education) originated in the U.S. in the early 1900s (Driscoll, 2014) of which history is intimately intertwined with that of experiential learning and experiential education, school-to-work programmes and initiatives, career academies and career-exploration programmes and service-learning programmes (Michigan Center for Career & Technical Education, 2015). In Europe, voluntary apprenticeships for youth originated in the early nineteenth century (Olson, 2013; Snell, 2014). Over the years,

internships have gained global recognition and application including in regions such as Asia, Africa and Latin America. The growth of internship programmes worldwide is best explained by the positive effects they have on the quality of instruction, professional development and education in general. In the light of this growth of internships, Zimbabwe has not been left behind. According to Bukaliya (2012) in order to accord the students the opportunity to attain hands-on experience, universities have introduced internship programmes in a number of both undergraduate and postgraduate studies. This has been done to provide students with a smooth transition from the academic world to the working environment.

NEXUS BETWEEN INTERNSHIP AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Above, it has been shorn how a learningIndeed, research has shown that there is a significant relationship between internship and the professional development of students. This is corroborated by Chow and Lan (2015) who in their study observed that service-learning and leadership education research has suggested that service-learning projects enhance students' leadership skills, in turn nurturing leaders with social responsibility for the twenty-first century. The results of their study further indicated that there is acquisition of shared-leadership skills, change of growth mindset, enhancement of social responsibility, and improvement of personal and social competencies among the students due to internship programmes (ibid).

Among the educational outcomes of internship programmes that have been noted, Merrit (2008) argues that during their internship programmes, students develop new, practical, usable skills of the workplace. He goes at length to detail that they learn aspects such as work ethic and work values, skills to help them compete effectively on the job and in life, to improve their interpersonal relations and communications skills, to improve their organizational skills, to improve computer literacy and technology skills, to work independently, researching skills, report writing, team-working skills from working cooperatively on group projects, to complete work on time, to be positive, professional and articulate, to be dependable, to show initiative and to be self-motivated (ibid). This is over and above the ability to put theory into practice which internship does provide for. Overall, internship programmes have been noted to contribute towards both the personal and career development of the students who undergo such programmes through exposing them to the real issues underlying their learning process. As internship exposes students to real life-work situations, students gain self-confidence and so build up their leadership abilities through leadership training.

On the converse, it is also true that organisations do benefit from the work of interns. In a study by Dalby (2009) it was found that in organisations, the interns assist with a range of ad-hoc and ongoing projects, allowing experienced staff to deliver more value-added customer services, such as research and content-development. Dalby (2009) went on to assert that interns also query established practices, offer new ideas, and ensure that the systems and behaviours remain relevant and transparent. Apart from just amassing experience, the interns have contact with the present team of experienced staff who facilitate their practical learning of issues learnt while at the university. Through internships, a majority of students were aided in establishing understanding of the broader information profession, work with views they came across in their theoretical study and are advised on their first professional positions after completing university education.

Chow and Lam (2015) argue that internships offer students field experiences given that they take students out into the community and the real world of work. This helps the students to apply what skills they learnt and to appreciate the practical intricacies surrounding their future professions. This is made more visible by the nature and quality of the internship. For instance, internships that are challenging and high quality have proven to be an effective and efficacious approach that has many advantages and few disadvantages (Merrit, 2008). To this end, past studies have revealed that there is a direct correlation between the internships in which students have served and the ultimate career paths, which they select (ibid).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Notwithstanding the fact that internships have been applauded for assimilating classroom education with practical experience by affording students the opportunity to transcend towards professionalism (Mpolomoka, Kanduza Sichali, Sampa & Hamweete, 2016), there have been a host of challenges that curtail the progression of internship in ODL institutions. The benefits of internship have not been well articulated in discourse underlying ODL. As such, not all programmes in ODL institutions undergo internship. Against this background, the present study sought to ascertain the benefits of internship to the professional development of students for the enhancement of employment opportunities.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The major purpose of the study was to examine the role of internship in promoting professional development in Universities with specific focus placed on the Zimbabwe Open University.

In the quest to achieve the above study, the following specific research objectives guided the study, namely, to:

1. examine the benefits of internship to students in ODL;

2. assess the impact of internship programmes on the professional development of students; and

3. evaluate methods used to improve the current internship systems at ZOU.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research approach in which a case study research design was employed. An interview schedule was used to gather information from a purposively chosen 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 organizations that offer professional counselling and those that deal with people with disabilities. Data were analysed using themes that emerged from the findings, which themes were also used for the presentation of the study findings.

FINDINGS

The findings of the study largely confirm John Dewey and David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory that places emphasis on a 'hands-on' approach during the learning process (Kolb, 2014). For Dewey and Kolb any kind of meaningful learning should be centered on experience, as a key driver. Barnwell (2016) guided by the same experiential learning theory, carried out a study to evaluate the impact of internships on

career preparation from the perspective of graduates. The results similarly suggest that Internship improved their level of career preparedness.

A host of advantages emanate from students interviewed across the six Regional Campuses that were selected for this study. However, equally important to note is the fact that there were a few disadvantages that were raised and will be subsequently highlighted.

From the interviews with participants, it emerged that internship critically helps students to cope with varied assignments given to them, which are omnipresent in the work environment.

In an interview with an intern from the Harare Regional Campus, she made this observation:

Internship has helped me a lot as it has made me able to multi-task and work under pressure. This is because in many instances, there are many things to be done almost at the same time and so you have to deal with each and every task accordingly.

Both the Oxford English Dictionary and Merriam-Webster Dictionary concur that the learner is a beginner and is viewed as employee of an organisation. The intern from Harare Regional Campus noted that she was literally employed and acknowledged that most of the material in the study modules learnt in classrooms are somehow not enough to produce knowledge and make her a competent graduate.

Another interviewee from the Mashonaland Central Regional Campus who confirms Bukaliya (2012) supported this view on the essential objectives of internship saying:

what internship has taught me is to be able to do a lot of things in a coordinated manner. You have to accomplish a lot of assignments given to you plus those that are related to school.

The above significantly points to the importance of internship in fostering coping mechanisms in students when faced with varied assignments. The emphasis is on coordinating tasks, which is essentially the practical aspect of working and this practical experience is much sought after by employers.

From the study, it was also indicated that internship helped students in realising and gaining knowledge on support systems for different cases for people with disabilities and those exposed to gender-based and domestic violence as well as rape. The students located in various organisations stated that they were exposed to a host systems crafted to support marginalised and affected groups of people including those living with disabilities and victims of violence. For instance, one interviewee noted:

it was interesting to learn that there are numerous bodies and facilities that help survivors of rape. During my internship, I learnt that there is the Adult Rape Clinic at Parirenyatwa Group of Hospitals and Harare Hospital. These help those exposed to rape in so many ways including counselling, post-exposure prophylaxis and other issues related to HIV exposure.

One interviewee also stated:

Being on internship really assisted me in knowing the various places to refer people who present different issues. I now keep a hard copy diary of addresses and locations for referral points because I don't want to be caught unaware and fail to help clients who

need specialist attention. Here I'm talking for example of people such as those who abuse substances and need rehabilitation services.

Therefore, internships help create awareness to students of systems that might not be readily visible to them when learning in the classroom.

Merrit (2008) argues that internships are definitely career-oriented curricular concerned with practical application. While this is true to a certain extent, Ayob et al (2013) noted with concern how some students fail to acquire relevant training. They argue that it is possible to go for internship but get experience that is not quite useful. Citing instances of a student from the Microelectronics program, attending training with a development and maintenance based company they argue that it is possible that one would end up not fully understanding the operation and technical aspects of their allocated projects since they may not be able to get basic knowledge in that area.

A more instructive example is where a company that is a provider of entrepreneurial training, tailored into providing support for the promotion of certain business products is likely not to be able to provide relevant experience required by the student to prepare himself for an engineering career.

Related to the above finding is the view that internship helped students to get something at work but at times, they would be relegated to secondary duties and serve as ancillary staff.

This was noted in one interview where the participant said:

Half the time I was available for senior management's personal errands and would be on standby to take up duties that had virtually nothing to do with my counselling degree such as preparing tea for everyone. The practice of rotating interns across many departments was also boring as I also felt it undermined the development of my specific areas on interest. However, there was some merit to the intership program such that my creativity was enhanced. In counselling, you meet different people with different problems and issues. These have to be dealt with differently and so require you to be very creative.

Similarly, another interviewee from Mashonaland West Regional Campus raised such a view:

In the field, you are confronted with diverse situations that need you to come up with innovative options. This means you have to be quick to think about these situations in order to help the clients.

Thus, internship in the field of counselling enhances the skills of students in dealing with clients for their future roles after completing their studies.

Rolf van, Patrick & Guido (2009), in a study on motivation and student's generic skills development, established that an individual's motivation could be enhanced by working at a reputable firm or in a team because they have credible sources of reference.

In the interviews, it emerged among the majority of the participants that they were highly motivated by the hands-on experience offered to them by internship. They noted that the practical experience showed them what it was like to be involved in counselling and this is agreement to Pacho (2015) who agrees that experiential learning promotes mindfulness and positive focus on a career. It also gave them the ability to apply the

theoretical and practical skills learnt in the classroom.

The study also found that internship helped the students to improve the application of counselling techniques, which they had learned during their undergraduate studies. Techniques such as joining, widening the view and facilitating dialogue were highly improved through the practical application of such techniques. In the interviews, it surfaced that through applying practice from theory, students were able to enhance their appreciation and utilisation of the techniques in counselling.

Finally, one of the findings of the study was that internship helped the students develop relationships with people in the profession for future collaborations. The majority of the students interviewed outlined that during the time that they were under internship, they met a host of different people both within the organisations they were attached and outside the organisation. This gave them the opportunity to interact and develop relations that might prove helpful for them in the future. From these developed relations, the students indicated that they were likely to secure future employment, advance their careers and engage in interactive debates in fora such as conferences, symposiums and workshops.

CONCLUSIONS

The study sought to explore how internship can be employed as a tool for professional development in universities. It used the Zimbabwe Open University as a case study because it is an ODL institution. This was accomplished by conducting in-depth interviews with Masters Degree pragrammes' students who had completed or were still under internship with various organisations. Based on the presented findings, several conclusions have been arrived at which are consistent with previous research suggesting internship enables students to acquire skills, which cannot be learned in the classroom environment and recommendations were proffered. Foremost, it can be concluded that the responses of students from across the six selected Regional Campuses have added credence to the significant role that internships do play a critical role in the counselling profession. Thus, there was common concurrence that internships are valuable in affording interns with practical comprehension of aspects learnt as well as giving them a wealth of exposure to the world of work. However, in order to implement internship programmes successfully there ought to be adequate resources to structure and monitor the programme. In addition, it is equally important for the interns to feel in control of some of their professional decisions in implementing their routine duties.

The third conclusion of the study was that internship programmes are a source of motivation for the students as they get to appreciate and apply the theoretical and conceptual aspects learnt in the classroom. Students can therefore easily adjudge whether what they learnt is practicable or not, and so are able to understand the relevance of their area of study. Fourthly, the study concluded that internship raises the students' ability to secure future employment by exposing them to different organisations that may potentially absorb them after completing their studies. Lastly, it was concluded that internships taught students the vital skills of employability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the positives of internship, there were concerns that the period the internship programme was rather short as only two semesters were set aside for that. With regard to this, the University ought to rethink its

policy on internship with a view to expand its duration where suitable. There is also further need to ensure that university staff pays more, frequent visits to the internship sites to allow for supervision that is more effective. It is the recommendation of the study that the University should liaise with organisations requiring interns such that it is not difficult for students to get internship placement. This is because the current scenario is that students have to seek internships on their own, armed only with an introductory letter from the university. The study further recommends that there is greater need for a coordinated approach on the part of the university and site supervisors on internship guidelines and expectations of the University as well as the host site. There should be the institutionalisation of statutes aimed at protecting interns against mistreatment by dishonest employers. Students on their own are encouraged to continue offering voluntary services to organisations who require their expertise even after they graduate. This will not only benefit the organisation but the student as well as the community. Dewey views this as a continuous cumulative interaction of a person and the world as rewarding and transforming (Dewey; 1934 cited in Pacho, 2015).

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