Internship Framework Guidelines for Malaysian Public Higher Education Institutes

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Abstract

Internship programs are designed to provide university students an opportunity to complement their formal education with career related experience. A study was conducted to establish a clear framework that will guide and give directions, to the management of internship training of all students in at public higher education institutes (PHEI). The guidelines will not only help PHEI develop their best practices in internship programs, but also, provide recommendations for industries on how to design and implement optimum internship programs. The data collected are categorized under five categories of stakeholders so as to gauge five different type of analysis. The analysis revealed considerable interest in internship programs for all the stakeholders, namely the students, general public, university administrators and the industry. The purpose of the study is to establish a clear framework that will guide and give direction, to the management of all internship training within the PHEI and industry. The guideline comprised of the planning, implementation and assessment stages. The framework also put forward advisories that are related to the local labor law and PHEI academic requirements.

Keywords: Malaysia, Higher education, Internship framework

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Internship programs are designed to provide university students with an opportunity to complement their formal education with career related experience (Marcel and Streumer, 2002). Historically in Malaysia these programs are initiated by universities as a formal part of their curriculum. In order to compete in today’s working environment, students often need more than just a university degree and the industry is putting pressure on PHEI to better prepare students for the actual requirements of their initial position.

As stated by the ministry, the new internship program is aimed at ensuring that the graduates are equipped with skills and experiences related to their field of study. A sound internship program will allow students to gain practical work experience and academic credit at the same time. Preliminary discussion at workshop conducted by the author shows that the experts agreed that the internship program should be compulsory and a requirement for students to graduate. As such, it is recommended that credit hours be awarded for their tenure with the organization. Credits depended on the duration of internship. Students can apply for internship at the corporate sector, government sector, NGOs, etc. However, the internship program need not be limited to organizations in Malaysia only. Internship abroad is recommended and guidelines need to be developed for Malaysian students doing internships abroad.
Students and businesses too demanded a better structured internship program that will ensure proper recruitment, mentoring and evaluation of students. It is evident that students gain a great deal from a proper structured internship program (Bowes and Harvey, 1999). And, in today’s competitive job market, internships have rapidly become a prerequisite for many full-time positions. Internship is especially important for professional courses (as per professional bodies’ requirements) and it is recommended that the internship program be extended to non-professional courses as well. It must be stressed that internships are appropriate for undergraduate or graduate students working in fields that relate directly to their career or academic interests.

Discussion from the workshop’s focus group emphasized that internship must be done full-time. The duration recommended ranges from 3 to 8 months for non-technical and general courses. The duration for technical and professional courses will vary according to the requirements of the accreditation boards of professional bodies. Generally, it depends on the types of programs. While some suggest that students do their internship in the final year of their studies, most agreed that it should be flexible and may vary according to university and industry needs. The program may be aggregated or carried out in a single period, for example, during semester break or taking one semester off. There is a need to comply with the approval of professional bodies and the senate. Guidelines relating to international students who are doing internships in Malaysia need to be developed.

As it stands now, all PHEI do encourage their students to enter their respective internship program, but there is no clear national policy on internship programs. The strategies adopted by different PHEI are varied. In fact, within the same university, there exists no standardized internship policy since it is up to the discretion of each faculty. Thus, there is a need to define the various terminologies used such as industrial training, internship, work placements, practicum, etc. To develop a standardized national internship policy, one has to be specific as to whether the terminologies are to be used interchangeably.

Businesses too do not have a standardized internship policy and this is reflected in a wide range of job scope performed by the interns. This is further aggravated by the fact that some well-off companies do not even have any internship program. It is indeed high time that a national internship policy be developed not only to help the students, but also, to guide universities and businesses developing their very own internship programs. The terms of internship need to be developed, standardized and communicated clearly to all parties involved. The terms may include workplace conditions, rules and regulations, confidentiality/liability agreement, terms of payment and insurance coverage.

2.0 BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

The issue of unemployment among local university graduates in public higher education institutes (PHEI) has caught the attention of the nation. Economically, this is not a trivial issue when we consider the amount of public money poured into local universities, the years spent by our youth in studying for a degree and the frustration of employers in recruiting graduates to keep the industry running. Carrel et al. (1989) describes that the ultimate cost will be the loss of economic competitiveness at a time when it has become crucial for our country to be globally competitive.

The Malaysian job market, which has showed considerable improvements after the 1998 economic crisis is still posing difficulties for the newly graduated university students. They are struggling to differentiate themselves from their peers when pursuing full-time job opportunities. The number of unemployed graduates differs, depending on their sources of information. A recent study conducted by the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) revealed that nearly 60,000 graduates are unemployed, many of whom cannot get jobs because of their lack of experience and poor English and communication skills. Interestingly, the EPU study stated that the typical unemployed graduate was female, from the majority ethnic Malay race and lower income groups. Majority of them majored in business studies or information technology, while 81 percent attended public universities, where the medium of instruction in many courses is the Malay language.

More recently, the Higher Education ministry announced that a more structured internship program would be implemented as one of the ways to resolve the problem of the unemployed graduates from local public universities. It was stressed that the new internship program will solve the problems raised by employers, such as the lack of soft skills among local graduates.
3.0 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study is to establish a clear framework that will guide and give direction, to the management of internship training of all students in PHEI. The framework will not only help PHEI develop best practices in internship programs, but also, provide recommendations for industries to design and implement optimum internship programs. Our goal is to provide an accurate, data-driven look at the national level internship environment that will help MOHE, PHEI and industries improve their existing internship programs or develop a solid foundation for a new internship program. The main objectives of this study are:

- to analyze the rationale for an internship program
- to identify competencies that would enhance employability
- to assess the design of the current internship programs
- to identify the strength and weaknesses of the current internship programs
- to recommend new policies for the enhancement of the internship program
- to develop a standardized internship program for all PHEI

4.0 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Site and Subjects

The methodology is designed in such a way that it will include a blend of solid data collected from business, technical and other existing local internship programs. Subjects for the study are identified stakeholders of the internship program such as students, industry players, academia, administrators, politicians, and the general public in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. Quotas will be set to ensure that a cross section of public attitudes is measured in the survey. The study will be conducted in the natural environment of the randomly selected stakeholders with minimum interference by the researcher. Due to resource constraints, it is not viable to seek the response of the entire population. A sample of the population is considered representative of the opinions of the group they represent.

4.2 Research Design and Procedure

The research process will involve both the collection of primary and secondary data, but the main method will be primary data survey. Observations and a workshop for experts in the internship program were undertaken to have a better understanding of the phenomena before viable theoretical frameworks were developed. Secondary data gathered through literature review and opinions of various writers gives an in-depth understanding of the study. Both qualitative and quantitative method will be used in the collection of primary data. The initial depth interviews will be used as a platform to develop the questionnaires for the telephone survey, online poll survey and questionnaire survey. The follow-up depth interviews were then used to explore the findings from these surveys in more detail (Debrah and Ofori, 2006).

The questionnaire survey is designed to document and assess existing conditions, analyze stakeholder expert’s opinions and to establish future requirements appropriate to the internship program. Follow-up depth interviews are usually used to explore some of the findings from the quantitative survey in more depth with a cross section of the stakeholders. As well as being used at the exploratory stages of a project, qualitative research can further explain and develop upon quantitative findings. Verbatim comments will be included in the main body of the report by profession; however, to protect the anonymity of the interviewees no comments are attributed to any one individual.

Prior to finalizing the survey questionnaires, a pilot survey was conducted to test whether the questions are ambiguous to the respondents. The questionnaires for the survey were carefully designed to avoid infringement into areas that may be considered unethical. The study was conducted in such a way that respondents did not suffer discomfort, embarrassment, or loss of privacy. The research ethics consideration of this study was demonstrated by ensuring the strictest confidentiality to the research participants. Respondents who would be interviewed were
informed in advance to eliminate the element of unpleasant surprise. Thus, respondents have given their informed consent before participating in the research. A brief description of the purpose and benefits of the study were discussed with the respondents before the interview. The interview drafts and the summarized responses to each question were tabulated and analyzed comparatively to identify key trends.

4.3 Data

The data collected are categorized under five categories of stakeholders; Students from PHEI that have undergone their internship program; Students from PHEI who has yet undergone their internship program; General Public; Industry and University Administrator.

5.0 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The result and analysis are breakdown into five different parts as to portray different sets of stakeholder’s interest. The sectors are; Students Assessment – Post Internship; Students Expectation vs. Reality – Pre-Internship; Public Perception: Industry Requirement and University Administrator View.

5.1 STUDENT ASSESSMENT-POST INTERNSHIP

We surveyed a total of 513 students from eleven public institutions about their internship experiences. The questionnaire are designed to help us determine if the students gained practical experience, knowledge, and/or skills from their recent internship experience and if they would recommend this internship experience to other students. The questionnaire is designed to help us gauged on the Quality of Experience; Advising Quality: Financial Compensation and Post-Internship Hiring.

5.1.1 Quality of Experience

From the overall statistics, it can be concluded the quality of experiences and student preparedness for these internships varies broadly. One of the most consistent things students said about those experiences was that the host needed to focus on giving students experiences to learn from. Nearly 90% of the students surveyed are satisfied with their respective internship program. When asked if they would recommend the organization where they performed their internship to other students, more than 80% of them said yes. The bottom line with an internship is that students are looking for an experience. They're not looking to spend a semester doing menial work.

5.1.2 Advising Qualities

Part of the questionnaire are designed to measure student perception of advisor qualities in an individual advising setting, change in content knowledge, and comfort with incorporating this new knowledge in educational planning activities (Armstrong, 1995). Nearly 82% of those surveyed concurred that what they learned at the university is applicable during their internship program. Nearly 90% of the students have high regard to their internship supervisor as a resource person or evaluator of their work. When asked the same question about their academic advisor roles, more than 70% agreed that it is important as a resource avenue of their internship program.

5.1.3 Financial Compensation

Nearly 42% of the internship students surveyed reported that they are not paid during their internship program. For those who are paid, 26% of them are getting less than RM300 while the other 32% are getting more than RM300. There are no provisions under the Malaysian Labor Law that stipulates that interns must be paid during their stint. These regulations do not apply to nonprofit organizations, such as most associations. But experts say they are good guidelines to keep in mind if a group must offer an internship without pay. In that case, it should be strictly a learning experience, and care should be taken to ensure the internship isn't just a free way to get a semester worth of labor.
5.1.4 Post-Internship Hiring

When asked whether they are satisfied with the integration they had with the organization and its employees, nearly 80% of them answered in a positive note. And when asked if their tenure made some sort of contribution to the organization, more than 90% of them said yes. It can be said that interns' assignment managers are the catalyst in whether a student will accept a full-time job, because they themselves model 'what it's really like' to work for the company. This survey also found that securing a full-time job was implicitly among the reasons students take internships. Others include gaining real-world experience, building their resumes, learning new skills, building connections and networking, earning money, adding fun to a semester, and mastering interesting tasks. But majority of the interns are clear about that from the beginning, so there are no big surprises down the road.

5.2 STUDENTS EXPECTATION VS. REALITY

We surveyed a total of 1390 students from eleven public institutions about their upcoming internship program that soon to be commence by their respective institutions. Undergraduates expect a lot more than mindless tasks when they sign on the dotted line and become interns for a few months a semester during the academic year. They want to feel valued and make a difference in the world. Doing unfulfilling work at an internship doesn't fit in with those goals. Reality, however, sometimes does not match expectations. The disconnect can be problematic for both the intern and the sponsoring company because some companies design their internship programs as a source for full-time talent. The questionnaire is designed to help us gauged on Job Content; Financial Compensation; Duration of Internship and Program Structure (Armstrong, 1995).

5.2.1 Job Content

One of the primary factors when deciding whether to take an internship is job content, which can strongly influence whether a student accepts a full-time offer with the company. This is not surprising since 41% of those surveyed prefer SME’s as their internship platform because the job content is probably most related to their field of studies. Surprisingly only 15% prefer to work in MNC’s. Students also have a very specific direction when choosing their internship site. More than three quarter (76%) surveyed states that they have a very specific business that they would like to be attached to.

Many students naturally prefer, and to an extent expect the formal type internship job content and most probably will be disappointed with the informal type. The fact is, no matter what the circumstances of the individual project or task, a commitment is expected to seeking out, participating in, and successfully completing an internship, and each student must make the best of the experience. In all aspects of the internship, each student must also never forget that he or she is continually representing not only his or her own integrity but also that of the program and the university as a whole.

5.2.2 Financial Compensation

When queried whether they should be compensated for their work, majority of the students (54%) agreed that they should be paid more than RM1000 per month. This expectation differed from the general public where majority of those interviewed is in the opinion that compensation should be between RM500 – RM700 per month is more appropriate. But the stark reality is that nearly one third (34%) of those students surveyed that have undergone their internship program are paid less than RM300 per month. Another form of compensation that can be meted out to the students is fee waiver by the university during the internship program. Majority of the students (76%) concurred that university should waive the fee as another form of compensation.

5.2.3 Duration of Internship

Most of the students (48%) concurred that a 3 – 6 months of internship stint is the most optimal duration since it does not conflict with the semester system of their university. This view is tallied with the statistics from students that have performed their internship program and also from the general public expectation of the program’s duration. Majority (71%) of the students also prefer the internship program to be conducted towards the end of their studies. This perception is understandable since the students regarded their internship should provide
them with the real world application of knowledge and skills they’ve learned in classes. It’s also an opportunity to explore an organization that they might be interested in working for upon graduation. This is an important part of their education and requires a great deal of preparation and planning.

5.2.4 Program Structure

As the students prepare for an internship, and in fact as it is experienced, it must be bear in mind that internship experiences can, and will, be very diverse. Some internships are formal, organized, and structured and may have a very specific project or task on which work is done either individually or as part of a group. A supervisor may also be readily accessible and available and be very involved in the project. Alternatively, an internship may be very informal, disorganized, and unstructured, and the project or task may be unclear and the supervisor relatively uninvolved in the work. When asked how do they expect their internship placement to be carried about, there is no distinct choice between the placement is determined by their university (54%) or of their own choice (46%). The results shows a considerable awareness that to get an internship placement is not an easy task. There is also a split when asked if they would like to attend classes (49%) during their internship stint. The assumption that can be derived from this answer is that these students do not want the internship program somehow impede their graduation date to a later date.

5.3 PUBLIC PERCEPTION ON THE INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

We conducted a telephone survey on the general public to gauge their perception on the current internship program for local university graduate.

5.3.1 The Need for a National Internship Policy

Majority (93%) of the general public surveyed agreed that Malaysia need a general policy regarding university student’s internship program. As it stands now, all PHEI do encourage their students to enter their respective internship program, but there is no clear national policy on internship programs. The strategies adopted by different PHEI are varied. In fact, within the same university, there exists no standardized internship policy since it is up to the discretion of each faculty. Thus, there is a need to define the various terminologies used such as industrial training, internship, work placements, practicum, etc. To develop a standardized national internship policy, one has to be specific as to whether the terminologies are to be used interchangeably.

Businesses too do not have a standardized internship policy and this is reflected in a wide range of job scope performed by the interns. This is further aggravated by the fact that some well-off companies do not even have any internship program. It is indeed high time that a national internship policy be developed not only to help the students, but also, to guide universities and businesses developing their very own internship programs. The terms of internship need to be developed, standardized and communicated clearly to all parties involved. The terms may include workplace conditions, rules and regulations, confidentiality/liability agreement, terms of payment and insurance coverage.

5.3.2 Mandatory Internship

The need of a national policy is stressed again when 68% of the general public interviewed agreed that internship program be made mandatory to all university students regardless of their courses. As the “real world” becomes more complex, the gaps of knowledge and experience that exist between the university classroom and the workplace continue to widen. The demand for skilled workforce is on the rise even more as the old generation retires. Common knowledge about our workforce readiness is no secret where it can be concluded that most university graduates lack critical skills and are ill-prepared to enter the workforce. The general public expected students to treat the internship as a serious course commitment. To ensure this, the programs are usually graded on a satisfactory/unsatisfactory basis. If the work performed is inadequate, the student will receive an unsatisfactory grade and no credit hours will be awarded. More than 67% of the general public interviewed is in the opinion that our university students lack the necessary commitment during their internship stint. When asked about the most appropriate duration of the internship program, nearly half (45%) agreed that it should be between 3 – 6 month period, which is about one semester. The students needed some ample duration of an internship ranges, allowing
time for the intern to acclimate to company work culture and time to master several leadership development learning curves.

5.3.3 Relationship between Unemployment and Internship

When asked whether there is any relationship between internship program and unemployment of university graduates, 82% of the respondents believed there exists some sort of relationship between them. This public perception is not surprising since the issue of unemployment among local university graduates at public higher education institutes has caught the attention of the nation, especially the media. The percentage of unemployed graduates differs, depending on their sources.

More than 65% of those interviewed agreed that part of the unemployment problem among local graduates stem from lack of training opportunities provided by their respective universities which in turn results in lack of workforce readiness among local graduates. In this respect there are a number of programs initiated to address this problem. Ministry of Human Resources (MOHR) Graduate Training Scheme (GTS) for example is to assist and equipped unemployed graduates in Malaysia secure the right skills to find employment. Evidence also indicates that graduate unemployment, and mismatches between graduates’ skills and the needs of the employment systems are on the rise.

5.3.4 Financial Compensation

Again the issue of paid or unpaid internship was asked. Three quarter of those interviewed (86%) is in the opinion that intern should be paid. Statistics from students who have undergone their internship program shows nearly half (42%) of those interviewed are not paid for their services. When asked what is the optimum pay, more than half (53%) of those interviewed said that the pay should be between RM500 – RM700 per month. The figure is considered optimal since it will cover the basic students need and also will not be a burden to the businesses.

5.4 INDUSTRY REQUIREMENT

We surveyed a total of 22 companies from SME’s to MNC that have their own internship programs to gauge their requirements and needs to the proposed policy on internship. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with the personnel manager of human resources of the respective companies.

5.4.1 Existence of an Internship Program

The majority of the companies have an internship program. Some companies have started the program some 20 years ago (1990) while others are relatively new in the field (2009). Some companies take it as part of their industrial development program.

5.4.2 Number of Interns

The number of interns recruited monthly ranges from one to 30 a month depending on the quotas from the respective department managers. However, the number of interns accepted depends on their qualifications and suitability based on their field of study. Most of the companies take in students from both the public and private colleges/universities. However, there are companies that show a preference for candidates from the private colleges or universities. Malaysians studying in overseas universities are also taken in as interns.

5.4.3 Application Procedure

For those companies with their own website, students are encouraged to apply online. Students interested in the internship program can write in or e-mail to the companies concerned. The student’s biodata, curriculum vitae, results from the previous semesters and a letter from the university have to be submitted together with their application. In some of the companies, applications are received directly from the colleges or universities.
Generally, companies prefer a recommendation letter from the universities. Some of the companies advertise in JobStreet or write directly to the universities. For some companies there is even an internship requisition form.

5.4.4 Skills of Interns

In terms of skills, some companies do not expect the interns to know everything as they are students. Most of the companies would like their interns to have good interpersonal skills. Interpersonal skill is rank highest among the skills that companies would like the interns to have. Of almost equal importance are technical skills and communication skills. Writing skill is not much sought after and computer skills would be an added advantage. In addition, companies want character building, attitudinal change and soft skill development.

5.5 PART 5: UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATOR

University administrators from public universities that deal with internship program were interviewed to gauge their experience when handling the program. The universities concerned are UMS, UPNM, UPSI, UTM, UUM, USM and UniMAP.

5.5.1 Duration

As a normal practice, all programs undertake between 4-10 weeks except for IT related programs where their duration is for one full semester. The credit allocation of each course also follows the general rule given by the Malaysia Qualification Agency (MQA) that stipulate one credit as two weeks unsupervised activity.

5.5.2 Semester Being Offered

The discussion also revealed that in most cases like social sciences and economic programs, their students are absorbed in employment by their industrial placement office. The Faculties are keen to pursue industrial training to be in the last semester. Some universities also revealed that their students are normally being offered employment at the end of their industrial training period and after finishing their final year of study. Some Universities/Faculties that offered their industrial training in between semesters and the students has to come back to continue their studies at university.

5.5.3 Industrial Training Site

It is interesting to note that majority of the students undertake their industrial training at city centers particularly Kuala Lumpur. The social sciences students are normally placed with social agencies and voluntary organizations. Professional courses emphasized on places related to specific site because their programs are highly designed based. The discipline taken by the students is a factor to consider when deciding on the placement for training.

5.5.4 Assessment of L1 Course

The norm practice in Universities gives a “Pass/Fail” grade for all programs. The general assessment of students is based on the Supervisor’s Report; Industrial Training Logbook and Visiting Lecturer’s Report. It is worth mentioning that there is also a seminar presented by students who went for the internship for their juniors. In this seminar, they share their experience and knowledge learnt throughout their industrial attachment. In certain cases, the students who completed their internship program are expected to identify some related case studies, produce a report and the student’s analysis of the situation.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS
The survey revealed considerable interest in internship programs for all the stakeholders, namely the students, general public and the industry. The next stage will require moving from the description of “typical practices and expectation” as revealed through this survey, to “best practices” as might be constructed by looking across the range of responses. These “best practices” will then be used to support the design and implementation of student internship policy (Beardwell et al., 2004).

This research project is part of an effort to increase the quality of students and employers participating in internships. This report helps us understand the “supply-side” of the internship transaction by tapping into the student perspective. A companion survey is also conducted to clarify the “demand”: how employers view their role in the internship process. How many employers host interns? What kind of projects do they use interns for? What are employers willing to pay for student interns? How do employers advertise their positions to students? What are the barriers that employers face in hosting interns? And how can regional programs help employers overcome those barriers? (Devanna et al, 1984).

It is clear from the survey that university students still consider internships to be vital parts of their academic experience. Students seek internships as a way to connect their academic training with the external world, to “test out” a possible career direction, to earn money in order to stay in school, to develop skills, and to gain experience and professional contacts. Employers often need professional workers who can “hit the ground running” and, therefore, seek out the brightest and most experienced new graduates. Internships prior to graduation are also becoming increasingly attractive to employers, who seek to convert these interns to full-time hires upon graduation. Internships play increasingly important roles in determining a student’s career direction and full-time employment options after graduating. Students with these experiences demonstrate greater career focus, and thus have more full-time employment options after graduation, which is important both in times of economic uncertainty and in robust fiscal conditions. The experience gained through a part-time job or internship gives a student a decisive edge in securing a meaningful and challenging position upon completion of their academic work at their respective universities.

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