

Assessment on Communication Students' Internship Performances from the Employers' Perspective

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Abstract--- Internship is a supervised and structured learning experience related to one's field of study or career goal. Internship allows students to obtain work experience and the opportunity to apply skills learned during university. Internship is a valuable learning experience for students; however, literature on employer assessment is scarce on Malaysian student's internship experience. This study focuses on employer's perspective on student's performances during their three months of internship. The results are based on the descriptive analysis of 45 sets of question gathered from the on-site supervisors of the interns. The survey of 45 on-site supervisor's feedback was collected through postal mail. It was found that, interns have not met their on-site supervisor's expectations in many areas. The significance of this study is employer's assessment on the internship shall be used as feedback to improve on ways how to prepare students for their internship and employments in future.

Keywords--- Employers perspective, internship, structured learning, student's performances.

I. INTRODUCTION

STUDENT internship (or co-operative education and learning) originated in the United States of America in the early 1900s [1]. Students are placed as interns with an organisation based on their fields of interest. Student internship allows students to obtain work experience and provide opportunities to apply skills learned during university. Industrial internship is an important aspect of an academic curriculum in higher education institutions in Malaysia [2].

Internship benefits are plentiful: it helps to improve the education of undergraduates [3], helps students to learn the course concepts and involves active learning (i.e., learn by doing) [4] and offers critical reflection and professional development of undergraduates out from classroom [5]. According to [6], internship also benefits the faculty academic programme and provides value to employers or industry partners [7]. Universities provide formal structured education which is guided by the faculty or teaching staff whereas internship promotes informal learning with less guidance from the industrial supervisor or employers.

Faculties in Malaysian universities that provide communication courses such as public relations, advertising, corporate communication, journalism, and media studies emphasise the importance of practical training for their undergraduates and make an effort to develop internship

programmes in their academic curriculum. For certain courses, internship (a.k.a. industrial training programme) is required for graduation and also in fulfilment of the credit hours necessitated in the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF) which proposed that the number of credit granted shall be not less than two (2) credit hours and no more than twelve (12) credit hours. The majority of higher education institutions in Malaysia offer internship programmes for the duration of three months to communication undergraduates. Many communication courses in higher education institutions have "sandwich" [8] internship system where undergraduates go for internship placement in either year three or four of their programme of study. This allows the undergraduates to merge their learning in university with real work environment thus enabling them to perform better during their internship.

The employability of communication students is not solely dependent on academic knowledge or performance but also on graduates who can perform core competencies in the working environment [9]. Some of the competencies considered vital by the employers are the ability to work in teams, being a good team player, and possessing problem-solving skills [10]. According to [11], internship can be an avenue for interns to practise presentation and writing genres which are essential skills for communication undergraduates.

Few studies have been done to collect data related to industry expectations and requirements in accepting undergraduates as interns [12]. Not many employers are willing to accept interns based on philanthropic motives but they are still attractive due to their availability and low-cost labour [13]. High grades and prestige of the university make students most attractive as a candidate for internship positions in the industry [14] and many industry supervisors prefer interns who can bring fresh ideas in the working place.

As part of its undergraduate curriculum, the Department of Communication and Liberal Arts in Sunway University Malaysia via its internship programme endeavours to allow students to gain practical, real-life industrial exposure, develop professional skills and work ethics and also enhance students' employability. Thus, the department has taken considerable effort in designing an internship programme that can accommodate students' future employability.

II. DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION AND LIBERAL ARTS (SUNWAY UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA) INTERNSHIP PROGRAMME

A. Introduction of Internship Programme

The Department of Communication and Liberal Arts in Sunway University Malaysia offers three undergraduate communications programme with dual degree (Lancaster

University, UK) which are Advertising and Design, Corporate Communication, and Public Relations Project Management [15]. Even though some of the modules in these three programmes train students in various aptitudes such as presentation, writing, designing and problem solving skills, partaking in internship will provide them with real-life skills which are important for their career. Therefore, internship is compulsory for these three programmes prior to the completion of their degree.

The undergraduates in the Department of Communication and Liberal Arts are awarded six credits hours of internship for the duration of three months (12 weeks). Students go for their internship in the final year of their three-year degree programme. Students who enrolled in the degree programme in March will commence internship in their third year, final semester and those who enrolled in August will commence internship during the second semester of the third year and return for their final semester in the university after the internship. The internship is coordinated by the Students Internship Committee of the department. The committee is responsible for the students' placement. It also maintains the relationship between the department and industrial supervisors.

III. THE PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

Every year from January till mid-March students from the department go for internship. However, no study has been carried out to examine employers' assessments of students' performance. This necessitates that a study be conducted to unravel how students perform during the internship programme in order to help the department meet industry expectations. Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to investigate employers' evaluation of communication students' internship performances and employers' expectations of the interns. These findings will not only be meaningful to the department but also to future interns in developing their practical and professional skills.

IV. METHODOLOGY

In this study, data were collected through evaluation forms sent to employers at the beginning of the internship in January 2015. These forms were sent by mail by the head of internship from the department and the employers were asked to return the forms through mail a week after completion of internship. In total, 45 evaluation forms were received from employers (a return rate of 100%). The department requested that all industrial supervisors provide a confidential performance evaluation of their interns. These forms were kept in confidentiality by the head of the internship in the communications department. Industrial supervisors were encouraged to share their feedback with the interns and some students received oral feedback directly from the supervisors.

The evaluation consists of two parts: quantitative five-point Likert-type questions which evaluate 15 skills performances and qualitative comments by the industrial supervisor. For the five-point Likert scale, supervisors were required to evaluate

interns with "1" for "very poor" and "5" for "excellent". The following 15 items were used in the data analysis:

TABLE I
 PERFORMANCES SKILLS EVALUATED BY THE EMPLOYERS

15 skills	
Commitment at work	Ability to carry out instructions
Quality of work	Willingness to accept criticism
Writing skills	Ability to cooperate
Oral skills	Relationship with colleagues
Competency in carrying out the task	Reliability for carrying out task
Meeting deadline	Manners
Creativity	Punctuality
Ability to make decisions	

The skills evaluated by the supervisors were not defined for supervisors and also not tested for external validity and reliability. The skills in the evaluation forms were created over the years by several department members with the input of the faculty members, internship committee and also previous heads of internship. Qualitative comments by the individual industrial supervisors indicate the overall performance of the students. The supervisors were also able to indicate the students' strengths, weaknesses and area for improvement. Most of the supervisors provided specific comments about the students. However, this research only focused on the quantitative part that focused on students performances. The sample of 45 supervisors represented a diverse range of industrial background: business, music and corporate industries, advertising and public relations agencies, and non-profit organisations.

V. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The researcher set out to obtain the supervisors feedback on communication students' performances during their internship programme. Mean scores are derived (Table II) to determine whether the supervisors have assessed the students' performances positively or negatively during their internship. As a five-point Likert scale was used, a mean score of more than three is taken as indicating the student performed better and received a favourable response from the supervisor.

Supervisors' evaluation on the students' performances strongly shows that most of the students performed better in some skills during their internship. The average of the performance evaluation skills from the highest to the lowest are shown in Table III.

The results showed that communication students performed better in eight skills above expectations and seven skills were below expectations. Ability to cooperate significantly scored higher than relationship with colleagues ($m=4.42$, $s.d. = .657$). This reflects that communication students were better in cooperating with others in the work place to complete the task assigned to them. Relatively high performances evaluated by the employers were found for 'relationship with colleagues' ($m=4.33$, $s.d. = .769$), 'manners' ($m=4.29$, $s.d. = .787$), and 'willingness to accept criticism' ($m=4.22$, $s.d. = .704$). This showed that communication interns from generation Y are

good at minding their manners and are open to criticism of their work. Students were willing to accept comments for improvement. The results also showed that communication students are committed to work, sometimes working more

than 8 hours especially those in the advertising and public relations agencies. 'Punctuality' at work scored ($m=4.09$, $s.d. = .848$) and 'ability to carry out instruction' ($m=4.07$, $s.d. = .809$).

TABLE II
 STUDENT'S PERFORMANCES BASED ON THE 15 SKILLS

Descriptive Statistics Regarding Internship Performance in Employers' Perspective					
Skills	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Commitment at work	45	2	5	4.09	.793
Quality of work	45	2	5	3.62	.716
Writing skills	45	2	5	3.62	.716
Oral skills	45	3	5	3.96	.562
Competency in carrying out the task	45	2	5	3.98	.753
Meeting deadline	45	2	5	3.89	.959
Creativity	45	2	5	3.69	.733
Ability to make decision	45	3	5	3.64	.712
Ability to carry out instructions	45	2	5	4.07	.809
Willingness to accept criticism	45	2	5	4.22	.704
Ability to cooperate	45	2	5	4.42	.657
Relationship with colleagues	45	2	5	4.33	.769
Reliability for carrying out task	45	2	5	4.11	.745
Manners	45	2	5	4.29	.787
Punctuality	45	2	5	4.09	.848

TABLE III
 STUDENT'S PERFORMANCES BASED ON LEVELS

Skills	Mean	Performances Indication	Std. Deviation
Ability to cooperate	4.42	High	.657
Relationship with colleagues	4.33		.769
Manners	4.29		.787
Willingness to accept criticism	4.22		.704
Reliability for carrying out task	4.11		.745
Commitment at work	4.09		.793
Punctuality (on time to work)	4.09	Average	.848
Ability to carry out instructions	4.07		.809
Competency in carrying out the task	3.98		.753
Oral skills	3.96		.562
Meeting deadline	3.89		.959
Creativity	3.69		.733
Ability to make decision	3.64		.712
Quality of work	3.62		.716
Writing skills	3.62		.716

It was noted that several important skills important for communication students were evaluated at the average level by the employers. The mean differences between competency in carrying out the task, oral skills, meeting deadline, creativity, ability to make decisions, quality of work and writing skills are ($m=3.98$, $s.d. = .753$), ($m=3.96$, $s.d. = .562$), ($m=3.89$, $s.d. = .959$), ($m=3.69$, $s.d. = .733$), ($m= 3.64$, $s.d. .712$), ($m=3.62$, $s.d. = .716$). Quality of work and writing skills were poorly performed by communication students during the internship. This could be due to students' lack of exposure in writing for the industry leading to an inability to produce quality work. Overall, the industrial supervisors evaluated the communication interns' ability to cooperate as the highest, followed by relationship with colleagues, mannerism and willingness to accept criticism. However, industrial supervisors rated the students' performances lowest for the following skills: competency in carrying out the task, oral

skills, meeting deadline, creativity, ability to make decisions, quality of work and writing skills.

VI. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The supervisors rated students' performances in the categories of 'ability to cooperate' and 'relationship with colleagues' as the highest skills perceived. On the contrary, quality of work and writing ability were perceived as lowest in performance. This concludes that communication students are strong in social skills at the worksite during internship but lack important skills that they learned in the courses such as writing and producing quality work. One reason for this could be a lack of initiative among the students during internship as it is not a full time job. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that internship can lead to an employment offer upon graduation.

The researcher examined the curricula of communication students; it clearly showed that they students have taken many modules that should prepare them in the areas evaluated by the internship supervisors. Modules that could help them perform better during internship are writing for projects in diverse contexts such as writing for media, proposals for campaign and events, and report writing. Moreover, all the modules required students to produce quality coursework during their studies in university to obtain good grades. Most of the modules in the communication department at Sunway University were designed to help students connect the coursework components with the internship and prepare them to perform well and beyond the supervisors' expectations.

Even though students performed better in eight out of 15 skills evaluated, the more important skills relevant to communication studies such as writing skills, ability to make decision, meeting deadlines, oral skills, and quality of work were unmet. Based on the findings of the study, a number of factors could be considered for future internship:

1. There must be collaboration among communication students, the communication department and the industry. The department must take initiative to know what is expected of the communication students by the employers. The department may run research by sending questionnaire to the employers or conduct focus group to obtain in depth information. By getting viable input from the industry, it may help the department to groom the students for internship.
2. The department could arrange training sessions and workshops for students conducted by industry experts. This would enable students to gain insight into the working environment thus helping students to understand better about internship.
3. The department can also use informal channels such as discussion and meetings with the students to deliberate various issues related to internship such as types of company to apply, company's expectations, training processes and other work-related issues.
4. Site visit by the department mentor to the worksite is essential. This arrangement can help maintain the relationship with the relevant industries.

VII. LIMITATIONS

This study has a limited sampling of only 45 respondents. This is due to the small number of communication students who are eligible for internship in 2015. Therefore, a total of 45 supervisors evaluated their performances. Future studies should include a larger sample size with more communication institutions in Malaysia. Another limitation in this study is that the 45 industrial supervisors were being asked to rate the students' performances according to their observation and perception. Without a definition of the skills being evaluated, students' performances may have been assessed based on supervisors' own personal standards which may vary significantly from supervisor to supervisor.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This study serves as a base for future research in the communication department and the university. It presents some key points in understanding employers' assessment of students' performances during the internship. Even though communications students scored highly in several skills, the department must pay additional attention to other equally if not more important skills which were scored lower.

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