

Gauging the Effectiveness of Six-week Internship Duration in Business Education in Pakistan: Implications for Policy and Practice

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Abstract

This small scale research was conducted to understand whether the duration of six-week internship which has been set by Higher Education Commission Pakistan is enough for interns to fulfill their desired objectives or not. To understand the issue at hand, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 interns who had completed their internship, regarding their views on time period of six-weeks. It was revealed that even though the majority of the interns thought that a six-week time period was not enough for them to achieve their learning objectives, the review of the literature and intern interviews discovered that the internships were not designed effectively and therefore could not deliver the desired results in the specified time.

Keywords: interns, internships, HEC Pakistan

Introduction

Business education institutes in Pakistan have to offer internship programs to their students, as it is a requirement by Higher Education Commission (HEC) in order for students to earn their degrees. One of the indicators for the effectiveness of an educational institute is considered to be the number of internship programs that are offered by industry to their students and the number of students availing internship opportunities (Research & Development Division, 2012). Hence, internships have been enforced by HEC on business institutions in order for their students to become effective members of the society by providing them with

quality education along with training and skills. HEC report by the Research and Development Division (2012) expresses the importance of internships by saying that industry should offer internships to students, as these will bring direct exposure of the industry to the students.

Internships can be defined as “Any carefully monitored piece of work or service experience in which an individual has intentional learning goals and reflects actively on what she or he is learning throughout the experience or duration of attachment” (Bukaliya, 2012, p. 120). The definition points out that in order for a task to be called an internship, not only should the ones assigned the task have their own goals but it should be an experience in a particular service for a fixed duration of time. The concept of internships has gone through a transition as was noted by Hurst and Good (2009). They conducted a review of the internship literature of the past 20 years and discovered that the general outlook of the employers and the academicians have been positive towards internships. They point out that the companies when recruiting interns are looking for a future employee and are saving their recruitment cost but are putting more time and effort in choosing the right intern. In addition, they elaborated that companies mark business schools that they feel would satiate their requirement for a suitable intern as it further reduces their effort and time. Paulins (2008) as cited in Hurst and Good (2009) established the importance of internships as these programs helped students to apply their classroom knowledge in real life situations, made them lifelong learners by teaching them to reflect on their situation and familiarized them with on-job setting.

Educational institutes, in collaboration with the host organizations, organize internships where students have to comply with the required duration of the internship (Albashiry, Voogt, & Pieters, 2011). Along with other important factors that create authentic learning for students during internships, the duration of internship for them to be effective is very important (Albashiry, Voogt, & Pieters, 2011). Even though there is no empirical evidence or study available that tells us of the specific time duration required for a beneficial internship; however, the body of literature does agree that the internship duration should be long enough that would meet with the internship objectives (Albashiry, Voogt, & Pieters, 2011; Divine, Linrud, Miller, & Wilson, 2007; McGowan, 2018). Depending upon the objectives of the internship, the internship programs in the US may vary from 2 to 18 months; whereas in European countries these are from 3 to 12 months (Albashiry, Voogt,

& Pieters, 2011). On the other hand, in Malaysia (Muhamad, Yahya, Shahimi & Mahzan, 2009) and most of the African countries (Bukaliya, 2012), the internship program is of 10 week duration. In Pakistan, the duration of a business internship program is six-weeks, which falls within the criteria laid down by HEC Pakistan. This small-scale research looked into the effectiveness of six-week internship duration and tried to answer the following research question:

To what extent is the six-week internship period enough for interns to achieve their internship goals?

Literature Review

To bring the Pakistani educational standards at par with the international education standards, Federal Government of Pakistan established Higher Education Commission, generally known as HEC (Sohail & Delin, 2013). While developing quality indicators for academia and educational institutes, national and international trends were also looked into by HEC so that there was a growth in socio-economics of the country (Memon, Sajid, & Qureshi, 2008) and the FRUCE model was developed for Pakistani business schools (Kolachi, 2013). The F in this model stands for faculty; R signifies research; U indicates for use of technology; C specifies corporate office and E stands for extracurricular activities (Kolachi, 2013). The corporate office in this model is responsible for industry linkages, corporate training, professional development of faculty and students (Kolachi, 2013) and is responsible for the six-week internship required by HEC in order for BBA and MBA full time students to secure a degree.

The purpose of an internship program in a business setting is not only for students to gain real world experience but it is their first step in building their resumes because in this highly competitive world, it might be difficult for them to acquire an entry level job without any prior experience (Bennett, 2018; Knouse, & Fontenot, 2008). Business internships provide the much-needed experience to students who are new to the job market. Business internships also provide a chance for networking where one is able to make connections with important people in their field and lastly, interns might find their future employers through internships (Bennett, 2018; Knouse, & Fontenot, 2008). Whatever the nature of an internship may be, one thing is very clear, that the academia, the industry as well as the interns know and understand the importance of the internship programs (Moore & Plugge,

2008). In the research conducted by Moore and Plugge (2008), the internship sponsors or the industry viewed internships to be a major provider of the workforce to them whereas the interns viewed internships as a practical learning experience. Pakistani business schools are no exception as business schools across Pakistan are trying to train their students to face the dynamic business world through their internship programs.

Since internships require full time dedication and commitment from the interns and have a broad scope to cover, therefore, it is preferred that internships be undertaken during the summer semester when the regular university sessions are off (Allen, Wachter, Blum, & Gilchrist, 2009; McGowan, 2018; Swanson & Tomkovick, 2014). A study conducted by Muhamad, Yahya, Shahimi and Mahzan's (2009) in Malaysian context found ten weeks of internships to be insufficient for intern expectations to be realized. Another study from the Zimbabwean context reported that the students were dissatisfied with their one semester long internship period because they felt this period was not enough for interns to become fully functional employees (Bukaliya, 2012). Hoyle and Goffnett (2013) came up with a framework to make marketing internships more fruitful for the marketing students. They concluded that at least 12 weeks were required in order for the interns to learn by doing, to gain career exposure, and to contribute positively to business performance. According to McGowan (2018) most business schools prefer internships to be at least a semester long. He quotes a recent survey research conducted by the Collegiate Employment Research Institute (CERI) that asked employers what was the desired internship time required to satisfy employer criteria of transitioning candidates from internships to full-time employment. The results revealed that 5% said 2-4 months; 30% indicated 3-4 months; 25 % felt 5-6 months; 9% opted for 7-10 months; and 30% indicated that the experience must be at least 12 months or longer. On the other hand, Gupta, Burns, and Schiferl (2010) conducted a quantitative study on 88 students who had completed their internship and found out that there was a direct correlation between students' satisfaction with their internships and their confidence in their ability to obtain a full-time position and the perceived importance of internships to future career success. Whereas, no correlation was found between students' satisfaction with their internship and internship duration.

The time period for business internships that HEC requires is six-weeks.

However, after going through the relevant literature, it seems like a farfetched idea that all these goals may be achieved in six-weeks' time duration. This research will put forward the lived experiences of the interns who were a part of the six-week internship regarding their duration of the internship period.

Methodology

The current study was devised to look into the research question pertaining to the time duration of business internships in Pakistan. According to Merriam (2009) the research methodology must be able to provide answers to the research question(s) posed. The qualitative methodology of interviews was used to collect data for this research as qualitative study provides insights into the lived experiences of individuals (Creswell, 2007). This study was aimed at understanding the effectiveness of six-week internship period.

Sample

Sample selection in qualitative research is mostly purposeful as the underlying assumption is that the researcher wants to gain insight or understand an issue; consequently, such cases should be selected that are information rich, that is, these cases can provide the researcher with optimum information regarding the issue at hand (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2011). A sample of 22 interns who had been a part of a six-week business internship program were interviewed to understand what were the pros and cons of the six-weeks' time period that HEC had recommended for students. All interns were BBA students from a prestigious private Pakistani business institute and had recently completed their internships. This group of 22 students could be further divided into three groups, keeping in mind their majors; where 10 were from marketing 6 were from Finance and 6 from HRM.

Instrument

Individual interviews “provide an opportunity for detailed investigation of each person’s personal perspective for in-depth understanding of the personal context within which the research phenomenon is located, and for very detailed subject coverage” (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 58). Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted to understand the opinion of the interns regarding the six-week internship period. After taking consent from the interviewees, the

interviews started by asking the interns how their internship experience was and moved on to the question regarding the time duration of the internship. Lastly, the questions were asked about why they thought the six-week period was enough or not enough. The interviews lasted from 25-30 minutes and were recorded.

Data Analysis

The data gathered from the interviews was analyzed using manual thematic analysis where the interviews were first transcribed, then the transcriptions were coded and the themes were extracted.

Findings

The findings of this research can be divided into two major themes: Satisfaction with six-weeks' time and dissatisfaction with six-weeks' time. Table 1 highlights how interns of the three majors view the duration of six-week internship.

Table 1

Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction of Six-week Internship Time Duration of Interns

	Satisfaction with six-weeks' time	Dissatisfaction with six-weeks' time
Marketing Interns	01	09
Finance Interns	03	03
HRM Interns	03	03

Satisfaction with Six-weeks' Time

This theme further revealed two sub-themes: Repetitive tasks and rotation based internships.

Repetitive tasks. It was observed that the interns who were involved in repetitive tasks thought that the six-week internship period was enough to accomplish the given task as in the case of a marketing intern and two finance interns. The marketing intern was given the task to make calls to various clients and had nothing new to learn, for this repetitive task, six-weeks were more than enough. Same was the case with the two finance interns where one was given the task of data entry. According to him, even six-week' time was more for the task that he was given; he had completed data entry in five weeks and then had to drag the last week.

The second finance intern expressed the same view in the following words:

“I guess 6 weeks was enough because when you go for an internship you are not working at a very high post so the work that they give you is not so diversified so I think for entry level 6 weeks is enough.”

Rotation based internships. Those interns who were a part of rotation-based internships felt that the six-week internship period was enough. This included one intern from the finance major and two from HRM major. Since their internships were tailor made to suit the six-week internship duration, therefore they were able to accomplish the task of being attached to a particular department for a given number of days. A finance intern who was a part of rotation based internship, shared her experience in the following words:

“It was effective very much I can now even work in a bank, I don’t need the type of supervision that I needed in this... in this internship. It was very effective I used to work from 9 to 5 continuously. It was a complete practice it was like working on a job. I think that six-weeks were enough to get the basic knowledge that how a bank works.”

There was one intern from the HRM who was involved in a project based internship but thought that six-weeks were enough for internship and said, *“Six-weeks was enough to understand the recruitment and selection process, I had learnt everything that have to do with recruitment and selection.”* It seems here that this intern was talking about understanding the whole process but not going through the process. When further probed, it was revealed that he was unable to complete the project given to him in six-week duration.

Dissatisfaction with Six-weeks’ Time

All interns who were a part of project-based internships thought that six-week internship duration was not enough to complete a project.

According to an HRM intern:

“Han jab tuk aap us pr set hotay hain aap ki internship khatam ho jati hai (by the time you settle down, the internship is over)”

Another HRM intern said:

“Maybe it could have been enough but in my case maybe I had something to do with the planning of the project that I could not do anything with regards to training and it just kept on being put off.”

The following two statements are from two finance interns:

“I believe at least two months is required for proper learning. Six months is- uh, six-weeks is very less time for any field- umm, a-a-anything to learn. You don't get to learn that much, you can at least understand properly what the processes are. So, two months is a good time.”

“No it's not enough because in 6 weeks I still remember, I had task but I did not have this much experience of how to do the tasks that was given to me.”

The marketing interns who were mostly involved in project-based internships had similar views about the six-week internship duration. According to them:

“One cannot understand anything in just six-weeks as two weeks are spent in just understanding the work and then four weeks pass by very quickly.”

“I think there shouldn't be any six-week internship because no learning takes place. There are so many things that are left out in a four month course, and we cannot learn so many things, so how can we learn things from practical life and practically in six-weeks.”

“Six-weeks is nothing, literally it’s nothing. My first day was spent in orientation. On second day I was meeting people, third day I was told about the whole system so you know two weeks are takes to just to understand the system of the company.”

“This was the question that I had in my mind also they are taking the interns but they are not actually learning anything from it because you get the hang of it in the third week and by the sixth week you are gone so you know it is mind boggling that how can a person learn in just 6 weeks.”

Overall, the six-weeks were not enough for the internships as most of the interns thought that there was much more to be learnt which could not be learnt due to the short time period. It was mostly advised that the internship period should be between two to three months in order to be more effective.

“Internship should be taken as a course like and some other institutions it is considered as a course, it is mandatory but it is not a course, so it is not taken so seriously by the students. So the student should report to the teacher every week either on Saturday or Sunday whatever suits them and the rest of the days of the week he or she should work in the company that is given to him.”

“Three months at least hona chahye (should be) at least for internship.”

“I think it should be at least of two months, as my internship was of two months.”

Most of the project-based internships could also not come to completion as they were not planned well and the interns were asked given tasks other than their projects. Thus, it was voiced by the interns that their educational institute should make sure that that the host organization has planned the internship well for the six-week duration.

“There should proper planning by the companies that what they want interns to do and how they will do that in six-week”

“Before sending the interns to any organization or any industry there should be a set of objectives like already there must be a plan designed that what will students from our university do there?”

“It is difficult to complete the project in time also because the job-supervisor keeps getting different tasks from the head and then she gives those to the intern. So the intern starts doing that work first.”

Discussion

It is important to note that the interns who were a part of this case study and in project based internships were unable to complete their projects in six-weeks. An HR intern was able to complete her project but that too in eight weeks' time. This problem mainly arose because the internships were not planned very efficiently and to cater for a six-weeks' time period. Bandow (2015) stresses that it is the responsibility of the host organizations to have a well-structured internship program ready for the interns where interns should be provided with clear responsibilities and a proper schedule to follow. The interns in this case were of the view that host organizations could never formulate such structured programs for the interns because their on-job supervisors put off the project tasks and new tasks were given to the interns to complete on urgent basis. This is because the interns' on-job supervisors continuously get different tasks from their heads, which need to be completed immediately. However, this practice takes its toll on the project. The problem here seems to be that the hosting organizations are keeping in mind their own benefit. Their internship program is not intern centered, rather it is host organization centered where the needs of the organization are kept more in view than the needs of the intern. Even though literature tells us that all tasks at the internship should be intern centered (Bandow, 2015; Bilslund & Nagy, 2015; Hmelo-Silver, 2004; Johari & Bradshaw, 2008) but the purpose of interns in task based and project based internship programs was more towards helping their on-job supervisors shed some work load. The non-completion of the project also adversely affects the self-efficacy and self-esteem of the interns (Johari & Bradshaw, 2008). It was seen in

the interviews that the interns were not satisfied with their own performance as they were unable to complete the given projects.

The rotation based internships were exclusively devised for interns to learn the system of a company and catered to the six-week internship program. The students who went through the rotation based internships were satisfied with their experience. These results coincide with the results of Cheong, Yahya, Shen and Yen (2014) who reported that the interns in rotation based internship were satisfied by their experience. These internships were held in large organizations and the internship structure was in place. These organizations were not in need of interns rather they accommodated interns on receiving application from them. The downside of rotation internships seemed to be that since there was not much requirement of the intern, they were not supervised very efficiently by their on-job supervisors and did not always receive a feedback, even though continuous and timely feedback is not only appreciated but also needed by interns in an internship (Bandow, 2015).

Even though HEC has made six-week internships mandatory for business students, it does not mean that institutions are restricted to six-week duration. They can make modifications in the program according to their requirement. Divine, Miller, Wilson and Linrud (2008) suggest that there is no one universal model for internships and that departments, institutes or organizations can decide upon the type of internship that suits them keeping in mind their goals to offer an internship program. "In considering the issues involved in developing an internship program a long run perspective should be kept in mind. It takes time to develop and refine the processes involved and to nurture the business contacts that are necessary for success," (Divine, Miller, Wilson, & Linrud, 2008, p. 7). The institute was currently working under the domain provided to it by HEC.

"A carefully thought out program for the duration of the internship together with a set of learning achievements should be made known to the interns. These will certainly make the interns and companies aware of the expectations of the internship" (Cheong, Yahya, Shen, & Yen, 2014, p. 342). Similarly, the research conducted by Gupta, Burns, and Schiferl (2010) that found, no correlation between students' satisfaction with their internship and internship duration must also be considered.

Whenever there is a limited time span to complete a given project, it becomes vital that not only the project objectives are realistic and do-able in the given time slot, but also, it is necessary that the interns must have the essential skillset which include, effective time management and planning skills, teamwork, social skills, and communication and presentation skills (Kosnik, Tingle, & III, 2013). Full benefit of the internship program can only be realized when the short duration of the internship is kept in mind while planning an internship, by both the host organizations and the academic institutes (Albashiry, Voogt, & Pieters, 2011; Cheong, Yahya, Shen, & Yen, 2014).

Conculsion and Recommendations

It must be emphased that while the question of how long the internship needs to be to be effective is an important policy question to address, the effectiveness of internship is not reducible to its duration alone. The current paper, while engages with issue of duration, identifies other factors that contribute to the effectiveness of internship programmes; therefore, it can be concluded that the effectiveness of the six-week internship program depends upon how well has it been planned and executed. The interns that were a part of repetitive tasks felt that six-weeks was more than enough for an internship as they had nothing new to learn and six-weeks was enough to learn a single task. Also, those students that were a part of rotation based intrernships were able to fulfil the required objectives effectively. But the latest trend in internships which are project based internships need more focused and comprehensive planning by the host organizations.

It is thus recommended that the educational institutes should work with the host organizations to make sure that the internships that are offered to the interns are effective and fruitful. Therefore, the first and the foremost for the educational institutes to do is to make sure that the interns are aware of the objectives of their internship. Next, the educational institutes and the host organizations should exactly know what will be the domain of work of the interns and how will the given objects be achieved in the six-weeks' time period. Lastly, an effective method of internship assessment must be developed whereby, interns should not only write their reflective journals but feedback from job supervisors should also be taken.

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