

Understanding the Role of Internship as an Activity Based Learning: A Case Study

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Abstract

Activity based learning is a successful educational model in various disciplines and recently it has been proved very effective in business institutes also. This paper was intended to explore the effects of internship in the university students of Pakistan as an activity based learning in order to boost their skills and abilities. Qualitative research as research design was adopted for the study following interpretivist paradigm. For the purpose of data collection, 30 students from business institutes were interviewed. Only those candidates were chosen who had recently completed their internship in well-known organizations of Pakistan. Data analyses was done through NVivo software version 11, suggested for qualitative data analyses. Findings propose that industrial internship is a viable activity for the learning and growth of university students. Practical experience, teamwork, understanding strengths and weaknesses, financial support for further studies and exposure to real world problems were found chief outcomes of internship in terms of professional development. Likewise, goal setting, internal motivation, confidence, punctuality, regularity and understanding responsibility in terms of personality development were found as key outcomes of internship for business students.

Keywords: activity based learning, business students, internships, professional development

Introduction

Activity Based Learning (ABL) in business empowers managers to comprehend and enhance product and client satisfaction, the cost of business

procedures (Ranganath, 2012). Brown (2000) informs that Activity Based Learning means perplexed assignments based on questions that involve students in planning, critical thinking, basic leadership or investigative exercises. It gives students the chance to work independently for predetermined time-frames. Students are required to perform in practical assignments and execute presentations.

Moreover, project-based internship programs come from student focused, critical thinking, open-ended situations and project-based learning techniques (Johari & Bradshaw, 2008). An important aspect of project-based internships is that they offer rich opportunities for career development by creating links with professionals (Knight, 2008).

Levine and Guy (2007) recognized that internships as ABL has emerged as the most popular tool among universities nowadays. Equally, Gault, Leach, and Duey (2010) specify that business internships as activity based learning project is essentially an open door that businesses offer to those students who are keen on picking up work involvement specifically industries. An internee works at an organization for a settled time period, typically three to six months. A few students will have a low maintenance internship in which they work at the workplace for only a couple of days or hours every week. Gault et al. (2010) added that internships offer students a golden opportunity to work in the areas of their interest. They figure out how their course of study applies to practical issues and this practical learning makes them more appealing candidates for vacancies after graduation.

Cheong, Yahya, Shen and, Yen (2014) found in their investigation in Malaysian business schools that the field of business requires versatile practices for some issues as much as other fields require. A business school has to award applicable skills and knowledge to management graduates, who will be comparable to the skills and knowledge possessed by existing business executives. Providing learning circumstances where information can be obtained, sorted out and connected at that point is a crucial consideration for business schools.

Similarly, Ranganath (2012) enlightened that ABL, especially through internship projects encourage learning exchange and professional development, which is the fundamental concern for business educators. Recent improvements in the state of the art technology have gotten critical consideration in the field of

business education. The combination of latest technology and projects such as ABL furnishes students to deal with numerous academic issues. Various studies reveal tremendous benefits of internship project as an activity based learning, for example, Gault et al. (2010), Knight (2008) and Khalil (2015) explained that industrial internship projects improve skills like problem solving and decision making, create connections of students with industries, assist in career selection, provide financial assistance and boost confidence.

Research Questions

1. What is the impact of internship projects on professional development of university students?
2. What effects do the internships have on the personality development of university students?

Literature Review

Knouse and Fontenot (2008) acknowledged that ABL provides a number of educational models for business and management teaching. In activity based learning a candidate is given the chance to learn in an ideal learning environment by performing field jobs and internships. Levine and Guy (2007) shared that activity based learning is a strategy whereby teachers demonstrate realistic challenges and provide practical life opportunities to students to develop their personality and professional capabilities. Therefore, activity-based learning is recognized as a standout among other methods for learning and instructing, particularly in business management (Ranganath, 2012).

As indicated by Cheong, Yahya, Shen, and Yen (2014) and Xiaochi (2012) that foreign instructors in advanced education foundations need to enhance aptitudes and handy information of students amid contact sessions. This does not mean just simple question and answer session and or allotting class work assignments. Velez and Giner (2015) added that to improve performance and abilities they are actively involved in the learning process. It is mandatory to assign them practical industrial projects in the form of field jobs, internships and practical role playing in order to improve their proficiency, capabilities and enable them to perform in a realistic organizational environment.

Recently, the Harvard Business School formed a committee on activity-based learning for the students with the purpose of outdoor learning in the form of field work and various industrial projects in order to boost the performance of their business students. For instance, the students who want to join the long lasting profession should supplement their scholarly planning with a scope of different other experiences, for example, study abroad, group services, research experiments, interest in extra-curricular activities and join other student foundations (Beard, 2007).

Thomas (2016) discovered that with struggle to change university education, Chinese researchers promoted the idea that the conventional method for learning is not adequate since organizations have changed regarding what they require from students. Instead of teaching with traditional system, students should be given an opportunity to explore emerging commercial and economic issues. Thus, Chinese colleges need to advance educational system and offer dynamic learning experiences.

Recently, most colleges fail to apply active learning dynamics, since it is a very robust process in which it is common to persuade students to talk, read, compose, respond and think profoundly (Rothman & Sisman, 2016). The accomplishment of internship project as ABL shows is to influence business students to feel in charge of their learning and to help their own particular individual advancement. For quite a long while, ABL has been actualized in instructing, learning educational module in an assortment of settings, from business schools to universities (Cheong, Yahya, Shen & Yen, 2014).

Narayanan, Olk, and Fukami (2010) conclude that utilizing internships as ABL for business students is not only productive for faculty, schools and businesses involved in the internship process, but also increases the proficiencies, abilities, opportunities, financial strengths and motivation of business students. It will aid them in their practical life and enlighten the overall relationship between universities and organizations.

Conceptual Framework

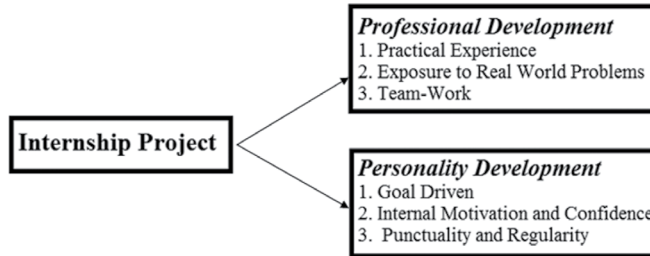


Figure 1. Conceptual model of study

The model of the study is based on the literature review and internship projects that are used mostly in business education universities as a tool of activity based learning. The model depicts that internship project such as ABL can have two major outcomes for the business students. First of all, it builds it professionally develops the students by enhancing career opportunities for them, developing their network with the industry and exposing them to the real life challenges. On the other hand, internship projects can increase skills, zeal, enthusiasm and self-confidence in students in form of personal development.

Methodology

This study is based on interpretivism research paradigm because the rationale is to conduct an in-depth study (Clarke, 2009). Moreover, research study is exploratory and qualitative in nature as qualitative research produces collective and obvious understandings of rich, related and normally unstructured, non-numerical and non-statistical data of the participants (Creswell, 2013). Justification of qualitative investigation is to know the feelings, impressions, sentiments and thinking of business students in order to recognize the outcomes of internship projects, that is, their personal and professional development and the change they feel in themselves after ABL.

Sample Size

For this study, students who had recently completed their internships in recognized business organizations of Pakistan were approached as a unit of analysis in order to get a deep understanding of their onsite experiences and learning. Yin (2015) suggests qualitative researches should take small, simple and uncomplicated

cases for data collection; therefore, for the study, 30 respondents from various universities of Punjab were approached for data collection and through semi structured interviews, data were obtained from the students. Justification for the sample size is suggested by Creswell (2013) in which it is advised that more than 25 candidates are enough for qualitative studies while interviewing individuals.

Data Collection Method

The data were collected from students who had completed their internship in well-known business organizations of Pakistan in order to know the effects of internship projects on the development of their personality and professional life. To accomplish this process, open ended semi-structured (video, audio and documented) interviews comprising a duration of 15-20 minutes were conducted to find out the feelings and concerns of intern students. Data were collected from various university students belonging to the discipline of business education. The participants were approached from six public and private well-reputed universities of Punjab, Pakistan.

Table 1
Sample Characteristics

Demographic	Values	Frequency
Gender	Male	21
	Female	9
Program	BBA (Hons.)	14
	MBA 3.5	9
	MBA 1.5	7
Internship duration	6 weeks	18
	8 weeks (two months)	8
	12 Weeks (three months)	4
Internship organization	National	13
	Multinational	17

Data Analysis

NVivo can assist many features of the qualitative study. If data are collected through interviews, software is applied properly, it can aid in transcription of data, arrangement, analyses and interpretation (Hutchison, Johnston, & Breckon, 2010). Likewise, NVivo software is the most recommended, suitable and effective tool for analyzing qualitative data (Ali & Lodhi, 2017). This is the most reliable and

most used qualitative software for dealing with video, audio and documented files (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Therefore, it has been used as data analyses tool.

Thematic analysis was carried to derive the themes. Firstly, the collected data were analyzed in several steps in NVivo. After that, recorded interviews were transcribed into textual form, and afterward different relevant themes were derived from the textual transcribed data.

Findings

Word Tag Cloud

Word Tag Cloud exhibits the dimension of different words according to their frequencies of reappearance or duplication in the data. Occurrence of words can be observed by their size and more repetitive words will have larger size than others. Actually, these words are important nodes (themes) highlighted by the software.



Figure 2. Word Tag Cloud

By using word frequency query, it may apply funneling approach and perform different steps. In the first step all unrelated words are added into 'word stop list' in the second step 'Word Tag Clouds' are displayed. However, those words, which were stopped in the first step, did not appear while displaying 'Words Tag Clouds' in the second step. The same process is repeated until exact themes of the study are displayed. The above figure reflects the major outcomes of internship project narrated by students in terms of their professional and personality development.

Word tree analysis. This analysis was done by keeping 'Development' word as a central chief word to know the relationships of the other major themes with it and how interviewees use the word and make different sentences using this word while sharing their views on the outcomes of internship as activity based learning. It may search a specific word using 'text search query' and NVivo software displays 'Word Tree' to provide the pattern of discussion of the participants in their interviews about the specific word which is being searched. The word development was connected to personal and professional development where the interns saw themselves developing in terms of team work, goal orientation and time management in their personal domain. In professional domain, they saw themselves develop through the corporate experience that they were gaining.

Tree map analysis. The Tree Map is also called the Hierarchy Chart. In the terms of NVivo software, it is used to display the significance of each node. The worth of each theme derived from the transcribed data of the study is enhanced. The Tree map showed outcomes of internship for students according to their importance in a particular region. The Tree Map derived experience, team work, understanding strengths and weaknesses, financial support and exposure to real world as chief outcomes of internship in professional development. Subsidiary outcomes were relationship building, cooperation, communication skills, ease in selection of career and negotiations. At the same time ability of goal driven, confidence, punctuality and regularity and understanding responsibility proved as major outcomes of internship from the perspective of personality development. While motivation, hardworking, time management and conflict management were identified as less important advantages of internship.

Different themes were derived from NVivo. Experience for example, was proven as the most important theme of the study. A number of students

have mentioned it as the most significant outcome of internships. Likewise, the ability of goal setting has been acknowledged by most of the students. Confidence development has also appeared as one of the important themes from the study. Similarly, team work and financial support are recognized as the major themes in terms of professional development of students.

They learned how to work in teams to develop a synergy effect. Punctuality and regularity on the other hand, are appeared as notable themes in terms of personal grooming of students as almost all the students mentioned this. Equally, relationship building, exposure to real world and ease of career selection are confirmed as important nodes for professional grooming. They come to know about relationship development. They interact with professional businessmen and tackle realist challenges in organizational scenario. Finally, motivation, time management and sense of responsibility are proved as critical themes for personal development after thorough investigation. All the themes are demonstrated in results of queries.

Discussion

In the present study, an attempt was made to explore the consequences of internship as activity based learning on the professional and personal development of university students of Punjab, Pakistan. The objectives of the study were to understand the impact of internship on the personal and professional development of business students. Both the objectives are achieved as numerous outcomes of internship are unearthed in findings section of the study. Queries derived by NVivo and their interpretation demonstrate the merits of internship evidently.

Chief outcomes of internship, for instance, are explored on professional and personality development of the business students as Franks and Oliver (2012) also acknowledged in their study that internships provide numerous opportunities for students to enhance their personal and professional growth. Results of the study are according to previous discoveries, for instance, study of Hurst, Thye, & Wise, (2014) confirmed that the benefits of internship on professional development include career selection, professional connections, industry experience, team work and exposure to real world challenges. Correspondingly, being goal driven, internal motivation and confidence, punctuality and regularity and understanding responsibility are the achievements of internships, which develops the personality as authenticated by Thomos (2016) along with Velez and Giner (2015) in their studies. The followings

are few key outcomes of internship as an ABL for business students.

Career Selection

During internships, students perform in realistic environment; they come to know about various domains of business management. They can find area of their specialization, that is, they can go for marketing which includes advertising, branding and sales related tasks or they can select the domain of Human Resource Management (HRM) which leads them towards training and development, staffing and compensation management. Likewise, by selecting Finance as their major discipline, they can join the areas of auditing, accounting, taxation and other related areas. Thus, internships assist students in career understanding and selection.

Teamwork Skills

When students perform in teams, they learn a number of things that could not be taught in a formal classroom sessions. They learn how to adjust, compromise and cooperate with others. During internship, they learn how to generate ideas, share thoughts and perform collectively, which becomes foundation of their future employment.

Goal Orientation and Time Management

Students are required to be goal oriented throughout the internship period. They have to manage their time, where tasks are scheduled in sessions of activity based learning. If they cannot not manage their time, they would not be able to learn. Internship tasks might include completing assignments, preparing presentations, record keeping, observations and others. In order to achieve these tasks, students have to set different goals and plan accordingly. All this is possible if time is managed properly. They learn how to divide time and how much time is required to accomplish a particular goal. Time management is not only essential for personal development, but also to survive in a professional environment.

Motivation, Confidence and Responsibility

Finally, students get motivated through observing mentors and other managers working in organizations. They feel energetic if appreciated by mentors or seniors and start performing efficiently and effectively. Correspondingly, in organizational environment students get confidence to achieve their targets.

Confidence gives them power to accomplish tasks and to utilize their skills. Motivation and confidence both create a sense of responsibility in students. Thus, during internship they realize their duties and strive to perform well in order to fulfill their responsibilities.

Internship as activity based learning has proved a rationale method of learning as students learn best when they are associated with an activity, where learning is organized into exercises. Ranganath (2012) established his study findings by adding that internships if used as activity based learning technique, standouts among other methods for learning and instructing, particularly in business management. Internships are excellent opportunities for the grooming and development of personality of students since it makes them goal oriented, increases their overall confidence level, motivates them, makes them punctual and regular and lastly, helps them understand how to manage their time. Similarly, internship projects can boost personal skills and assist in personal growth of students particularly when used as experiential learning (Johari & Bradshaw, 2008; Khalil, 2015; Rothman & Sisman, 2016).

From the perspective of professional accomplishments, internships assist students to learn how to work in teams, guides them in career selection, provides them with practical experience of industry, which cannot be achieved in a contrived scenario of classroom and provides financial support so they can achieve other milestones. Moreover, Ruggiero and Boehm (2017), Thomas (2016) along with Velez and Giner (2015) also established similar outcomes of internship project.

As far as implications of internship are concerned, universities should conduct proper programs and seminars to help students understanding the significance of internships. Universities must understand that sessions of classrooms are not enough and students must visit actual situations to develop skills of problem solving, situation handling and decision making at the right time and in an accurate way. To conclude, Weible and McClure (2011) and Ruggiero and Boehm (2017) also support most of the above mentioned findings in their studies.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of the study to explore the impact of internship project as an activity based learning for university business students. Following the qualitative

research paradigm, 30 business students studying in a well-known universities of Punjab, Pakistan those who had completed their internships were approached and interviewed in order to know their experience of internship projects and inquire about their professional and personality development. Qualitative research design was followed under the research paradigm of interpretivism approach.

After in-depth analyses, findings revealed that practical experience, teamwork, understanding strengths and weaknesses, financial support for further studies and exposure to real world problems in terms of professional development were found as the outcomes of the study. Moreover, being goal oriented, motivated, confident, punctual, along with sense of responsibility were found as the main upshots of the internship projects for university students.

Although it was a comprehensive study covering all the objectives and aspects that were proposed, yet the findings of the study undoubtedly raised more questions on different unidentified implications of internship as activity based learning project. Continuous efforts are needed to explore different outcomes of internship for organizations and universities as well. This study suggests some fruitful areas for future research:

1. Uncovering the extent of relationships of different contextual outcomes of internship, that is, personality and professional development.
2. Addition of new dimensions as output of internship including academic performance enhancement, organizational development and performance efficiency.
3. Inter-country comparison of the internship outcomes.

From this research, it is evident that the internship is creative in developing and boosting the learning skills of students and has an insight into advanced learning approaches. Any future study aiming to investigate internship as activity-based learning should consider:

- Conducting an extensive investigation on the consequences of activity-based learning itself initially.
- Attempting to discover other advantages of internship on the academic

career of students and as a foundation for students for their upcoming professional career.

- Emphasizing on the affirmative progressive consequences of internship for educational institutions as well as organizations.

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