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Impact of Internship Programmes on the Academic Performance of State University Undergraduates of Sri Lanka: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

The benefits and detriments of Internship Programmes (IPs) had been discussed over past decades by many scholars. Similarly identifying the impact of IPs to the academic performance of the state university undergraduates in Sri Lanka is very important currently. The overall objective of the study is to identify whether there is an impact of IPs to the academic performance of the state university undergraduates in Sri Lanka. The research problem of this study: Whether there is an impact of IPs to the academic performance of the state university undergraduates in Sri Lanka? The data was collected from 20 undergraduates from 3 departments (cases). All three cases have IPs as the part of the degree curriculum. Interviews are the main research method used for data gathering. Both students and lecturers were interviewed. In addition secondary data was collected through University documents. There is an impact of IPs to the academic performance of students. Benefits and detriments were identified as a result of students going to work while being full time undergraduates. Students develop many skills due to the IPs and those skills help them to perform well within the classroom. It was clear that there is an impact of Internship Programmes to the academic performance of the students.

Keywords: *Internship Programmes (IPs), Academic Performance, Time Management*

Introduction

Students should be involved in active learning rather than just interacting within classroom activities that were pre-designed, and these active learning can occur inside or outside the classroom. This idea was conferred by Chickering and Gamson (1987, p.4) in their study and it was mentioned as, '*Students do not learn much just by sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorizing pre-packaged assignments, and spitting out answers*'. The importance of out of classroom experience or work-based learning grows eventually.

Even in Sri Lanka these IPs had become a requirement of degree curriculum in most of the state universities (Faculty Prospectus of University of the Sri Jayewardenepura 2010/11). Through all these years the benefits and detriments of IPs had been discussed by many scholars around the world. When it comes to Sri Lankan context we can rather say there is no such study that had been conducted up to now. So the main purpose of this study is to have a depth understanding of these IPs and how it affects the students' academic performance of undergraduates of state universities in Sri Lanka.

Problem Background and Problem of the Study

Cooperative education and internship programmes are pre-professional instructing, originated in academic departments (Bechtel 1993 p. 26). Further defining internships he mentioned in his articles as *'The classic definition of an internship is an academically parallel out-of-classroom experience for academic credit'*. Knouse et al. (1999) argued that interns and non-interns started the college with the same abilities, even same grades but when at the graduation interns get better classes than non-interns. Also sometimes the GPA gap was significantly different. In midst of all the benefits derived from an internship, recent studies by Curtis and Shani (2002) reported that working students (mostly highlighting part time working students) show negative behavior towards studies such as missing lectures, lower grading and also negative consequences to their health (Carney et al. 2005). In present most of the departments in Management Faculties in state universities allow and encourage students to undergo training while they are being internal students. But as per the background investigations carried out (informal chats with students) most of the students struggle meeting both demands of workplace and university. Therefore it is still not clear how this affects the students' academic performance and how far they were able to manage, especially their studies. Therefore this research determines to identify whether there is an impact of IPs to the academic performance of the undergraduates of Sri Lankan Universities.

Research Framework

Knouse et al. (1999) argued that interns and non-interns started the college with the same abilities, even same grades but when at the graduation interns get better classes than non-interns. Also sometimes the GPA gap was significantly different. As cited in Callender (2008) from Kalenkoskis and Pabilionia (2005) they discussed that the additional hours worked had a positive effect on academic performance.

The negative consequences of working for the undergraduates also been discussed by Curtis and Shani (2002) reported that working students (mostly highlighting part time working students) show negative behaviour towards studies such as missing lectures, lower grading and also negative consequences to their health. Further proving negative consequences by work to academic performance, Carney et al. (2005) shows that the British students have significantly lower levels of mental health compared to general population and norms. Therefore this study derived proposition one as; there is a direct impact of IPs to the academic performance of the undergraduates.

Billett et al. (2005) and Glasersfeld (2008) describe that there are many ways of referring to work-based learning as a component of higher educational policy and as many authors describe that as relatively structured activities occurring in the workplace that equipped students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to succeed at work and in society. Participating real work that is purposely designed to integrate with learning in the classroom makes students to exchange and negotiate between these experiences and their own cognitive frameworks (Raelin 2011).

As cited in Kim, Kim and Bzullak (2011) from Gault et al. (2000); Richards (1984) internship provides benefits not only for the students but also for the employers. As mentioned, it provides important public administration skills, also gives an opportunity to apply technical skills learnt in the class room to the real world, while understanding the gaps of theories and real world applications. Therefore this study derived proposition two as there is an impact of IPs to the skill development of the undergraduates.

Method

The topic 'impact of IPs on the academic performance' had been investigated before as well, but that is in a quantitative manner in which only the tip of the iceberg had been touched. On the other hand no such study had been conducted in the Sri Lankan context. The qualitative approach was used to answer the research question because in the study researchers expected to get different viewpoints of relevant parties. With the purpose of in depth understanding the researcher chose critical case study analysis. Here three entities (three departments) had been analyzed more intensively. The three cases are the Department of Marketing, the Department of Human Resource Management and the Department of Accounting.

Interviews are the main research method used for data gathering. Both students and lecturers were interviewed. In addition secondary data was collected through the university documents. Documentary analysis was also conducted to get a proper understanding. Population of the study was the undergraduate students of management faculties of state universities of Sri Lanka. However, this research considers one state university that located in the Colombo district as the accessible population of the study. Number of elements in the accessible population was around 1200 students.

The individuals (unit of analysis) were chosen based on purposive sampling technique with the purpose of attending much more comparative and in-depth analysis (Table 01).

Table 01: Sample of the Study

Sample	Sample Size
Lecturers	3
Undergraduates from department of Marketing	5
Undergraduates from department of HRM	6
Undergraduates from department of Accounting	5

Validity and Reliability of the Study

Qualitative study should be evaluated and judged according to quite different criteria, those used by quantitative researchers. As cited in Bryman and Bell (2003) by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Guba and Lincoln (1994) proposed two primary criteria to assess a qualitative research that is trustworthiness and authenticity.

Trustworthiness is made up of four criteria (Bryman and Bell 2003). That is credibility, transferability, conformability and dependability. Credibility stresses on multiple accounts of social reality that is several possible accounts for an aspect of social reality. This also

alternatively called member validation or respondent validation. In this study, researcher was able to confirm the credibility through triangulation technique. Triangulation is used in this study where both undergraduates' and lecturers' perspective is accounted through semi structured interviews.

Transferability is equal to external validity which was described by LeComte and Goetz (cited in Bryman and Bell 2003). But the conformability of the criteria is questionable because research is done through case study where only few critical cases are analyzed. Dependability is ensured throughout the research by keeping full records in all phases of the research process from problem formulation to the final research finding under the supervision and guide of the research supervisor. Especially interview tapes and transcripts are maintained to ensure the dependability of the study. Conformability shows that researcher has acted in good faith. It should be apparent that he or she has not overtly allowed personal values or theoretical inclinations influence the way that the research conducted and the findings derived from it (Bryman and Bell 2003).

Authenticity addresses a wider range of issues that relates to the political impact of the research. One criterion of authenticity is *fairness*, which represent whether the researcher fairly represent different viewpoints of members of the social setting (Bryman and Bell 2003). Researcher concerned viewpoints of undergraduates as well as lecturers fairness is confirmed in this research. Another aspect of authenticity is *ontological authenticity* where the researcher helps the members to understand person's social environment (Bryman and Bell 2003). This confirms throughout the interviews where the researcher elaborates and clarifies when it is necessary to the member to understand his/her situation, which was critically important in this research.

Discussion and Conclusion

The overall objective of the study is to identify whether there is an impact of IPs to the academic performance of the state university undergraduates. This study specifically aims to identify various benefits and detriments that generate as a result of going through an IPs and to identify how those benefits and detriments affect the academic performance of the undergraduates.

Proposition 1 describes that there is a direct impact of IPs to the academic performance of the undergraduates. Callender's (2008) study was conducted based on the impact of term-time employment on full-time undergraduates' academic attainment, particularly on their actual marks and final degree results. He found out that there was a negative term-time working effect on final year marks. In the study there were some students with drastic drop in their GPA but most of the students do not show such drop in their GPA. In the midst Knouse et al. (1999) argued that interns and non-interns started the college with the same abilities, even same grades but when at the graduation interns get better classes than non-interns. In this research we did not compare interns and non-interns, but we did compare their GPA before and after IPs. Except for few students most of the students show less deviation in GPA, this may be because of the benefits of IPs had minimized the detriments of IPs.

Proposition 2 explains that there is an impact of IPs to the skill development of the undergraduates. Through the study it was found that IPs gives greater help to develop skills and competencies in students and those skills might lead to good academic performance as well. We can agree with the research findings of Gault et al. (2000) and Richards (1984). As cited in Kim, Kim and Bzullak (2011) from Gault et al. (2000) Richards (1984) internship provides benefits not only for students but also for employers. As mentioned, it provides important public administration skills, also gives an opportunity to apply technical skills learn in the class room to the real world, while understanding the gaps of theories and real world applications. From the study it was conclusive that students specially develop communication skills, coordination skills and time management skills. Also students were able to build a good personality and better perception about themselves. These new skills help them to perform well within the classroom as well.

Through internships not only students but also organizations do develop. Organizations take less experienced but talented individuals as interns. So this could lead to development of both the students and the company (Maertz Jr, Philipp and Marks 2007). We can agree with the fact that students did develop through IPs, but in this study we did not focus on how that helps to develop organizations. Still from the facts that students mentioning that they contribute to develop new procedures and they questioned inefficient practices, those things might leads to develop of the organization as well.

Chickering and Gamson (1987) mentioned that students should have a chance to talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences and apply it to their daily lives. These things will lead to a good academic performance where students practically experience what they learn. Participating real work that is purposely designed to integrate with learning in the classroom makes students to exchange and negotiate between these experiences and their own cognitive frameworks (Raelin 2010). As Raelin mentioned through the study it was discovered that students get thorough with what they learn within classroom, when they go out and work in a properly designed IPs.

Another major finding of the study was that help from departments, employers, colleagues and family members affect the balancing procedure of work between university and office. Employer's support plays a major role and students who get such support did not show any high deviation in GPA. Also students' ability to manage time efficiently has an impact on their success of academic work. Though this fact was not proven numerically, this was solely derived from the information generated through interviews.

The overall objective of the study was to identify whether there is an impact of IPs to the academic performance of the state university undergraduates. From the findings of the study it was clear that there is an impact of IPs to the academic performance of students. Benefits and detriments were identified as a result of students going to work while being full time undergraduates. It was conclusive that students develop many skills due to the IPs and those skills help them to perform well within the classroom.

Future Research Implications

This research was a qualitative study and researcher tries to understand the deep inside the matter and find out whether there is an impact of IPs to academic performance. A survey can be conducted to establish the relationship between two variables. Also one can go further and study how the IPs affects the career success of students.

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