

ASSESSMENT IN INTERNSHIP – EXPERIENCES OF ACCOUNTANCY DEGREE PROGRAMME – UNIVERSITY OF KELANIYA

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Abstract

Internship has become an important component in accounting degree programmes in universities over the past decades. Academics and researchers believe that internship provides smooth transition of undergraduates from oncampus environment to the working environment (Muhamad et al 2009). Further, practitioners in accounting profession have identified that internship experience benefits not only to improve the quality of the degree programme and the skills of the students but also benefits to the employing entity during and after the internship (Beard 2006). Hence, interaction and evaluations among students, faculty and practitioners during and after the internship is invaluable in measuring outcome of the internship programme.

Department of Accountancy (DoA), University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka has introduced internship to the accounting degree curriculum in 1998. DoA believes that the objective of introducing the internship component to Accounting programme is to facilitate students to gain practical exposure from the dynamic business environment, and to enhance teamwork spirit and the employability. To achieve these objectives multiple assessment activities have been introduced in par with the International Accounting Bench Marks designed by Universities and professional institutions, and those activities have been increasingly changed to strengthening the programme.

The objective of this paper presents the multiple assessment activities created by DoA in internship programme since 1998 to maintain the quality of the accounting degree programme. The assessment activities presented in this article are useful for other accounting programmes for improving quality and for accreditation of their degree programmes.

Key words: Internship, Accounting, Assessment Activities

Background of the study

Internship has become an important component in accounting degree programmes in universities over the past decades. Academics and researchers believe that internship provides smooth transition of undergraduates from oncampus environment to the working environment (Muhamad et al 2009). Further, practitioners in accounting profession have identified that internship

experience benefits not only to improve the quality of the degree programme and the skills of the students but also benefits to the employing entity during and after the internship (Beard 2006). Hence, interaction and evaluations among students, faculty and practitioners during and after the internship is invaluable in measuring outcome of the internship programme.

Most of the higher learning institutions offer internship for their undergraduates to provide a smooth transition from the academic world to the working environment. Internship has taken on an increasingly important role in business education over the past decades (Tackett, Wolf, & Law, 2001). Academic and practitioner members of the accounting profession have recognized the contribution which internship experiences can make to the student, the institution, and the employing entity both during and following the internship. Well-organized and carefully supervised programmes enhance the student's ability to integrate academic knowledge with practical application, improve career opportunities after graduation, create relevance for past and future classroom learning, develop work place social and human relation skills and provide the opportunity for students to apply communication and problem-solving skills. Employers have reported lower turnover rates for collage hires who have participated in an internship or cooperative education assignment in contrast to college hires who have not completed these experiential learning activities (Deborah, 2007).

According to Tackett et al. (2001), internship plays an increasingly important role in education over the past decades since it presents students with many advantages, ranging from gaining hands on experience and obtaining careerrelated direction to networking with other students coming from various institutions.

The Department of Accountancy (DoA) is one of the leading departments in the Faculty of Commerce & Management Studies, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. The Department was established in 1995 and in 1999 it was upgraded to a full departmental status and named as "Department of Accountancy". At present, it conducts the Bachelor of Business Management (Special) Degree in Accountancy programme. It strives to nurture well rounded Accountancy graduates who are competent professionals and lifelong learners equipped to cope with a globalized work environment.

DoA has become a pioneer of introducing internship programme into the undergraduate curriculum of the university system in the year 1998. Moreover, internship programme was formalized to a certain extent through Improving Relevance and Quality of Undergraduate Education (IRQUE) project initiatives in 2005. This formalization process caused to enhance the recognition of internship among the stakeholders including students and training providers. Transport facilities also provided to reach training destinations in time of students.

The DoA recognized that continuous improvement of internship is needed to meet the changing expectations of stakeholders. Scanning both current and desired situation, a gap analysis was done and identified problems and issues pertaining to the existing internship programme. The training design under the internship programme should be an outcome based to meet the contemporary competency demands of the industry. DoA has identified the gap of the existing monitoring and evaluating system for the internship where it should consist of prior, ongoing and the post-internship monitoring. Except the absence of identified and specialized training categories and evaluation procedures, manipulations of daily training records by interns is another shortcoming of the internship programme. Moreover, the DoA's Internship programme did not follow a standard model and as a result, trainees and training providers trapped with unresolved problems.

With the results of said indept study of exsisting internship programme, DoA realized that the objective of introducing the internship component to Accounting programme is to facilitate students to gain practical exposure from the dynamic business environment, and to enhance teamwork sprit and the employability. To achieve these objectives multiple assessment activities have been introduced in par with the International Accounting Bench Marks designed by Universities and professional institutions, and those activities have been increasingly changed to strengthening the programme.

The objective of this paper is to present the multiple assessment activities created by DoA in internship programme since 1998 to maintain the quality of the accounting degree programme. The assessment activities presented in this article are useful for other accounting programmes for improving quality and for accreditation of their degree programmes.

Review of Literature

Internships have been promoted as a means for enhancing the knowledge base and motivational level of aspiring accountants. These experiences can make subsequent study more meaningful and develop the student professionally before entry into the marketplace. In addition, internships can be an effective career exploration and placement vehicle (Deborah, 2007). Lang (1979), Chandra and Paperman (1983) identified advantages and disadvantages of internships to students and participating firms. Ricchiute (1980) and Goodman (1982) found internships to be an effective way to keep a firm's professional stature visible to accounting students. Goodman (1982) reported that a high percentage of interns was offered and accepted full-time positions at the same firm where they interned. Knechel and Snowball (1987) found that the auditing course work performed by interns was significantly better than that of the noninternship students. Pasewark et al. (1989) discovered that previous internship experience had a significant effect only on the probability of receiving an off-campus visit with a (then) Big Eight accounting firms.

English and Koeppen (1993) determined that internship students performed significantly better than non-internship students in accounting courses, and in overall GPA performance subsequent to the internship semester. Beard (1998b) reported that internship programs can benefit industry by providing a vehicle for recruiting future employees, providing needed part-time and special project employees, developing linkages with universities, and enhancing the company's image in the community. Accounting programs can benefit from enhanced placement opportunities of graduates, the reinforcement or enhancement of classroom learning, increased support of their programs by industry, and feedback concerning their accounting curriculum.

Thilakarathne and Mudurapperuma (2014) found that internships have a positive impact on learning and higher scores tend to have a higher GPA and gender is negatively correlated with GPA signaling that male students performed better than female students. They have examined the effect of accounting student internships on subsequent academic performance in one of the national universities in Sri Lanka. Various researches investigate the expectations of students and employers towards the internship programme. Tackett et al. (2001) mention four specific areas, namely, ethics, oral and written communication skills, office conduct and technical skills where interns and employers have conflicting perceptions. Students hope to receive monetary rewards and be treated as regular employees.

Statement of Procedures

With the intention of enhancing the existing internship to the global level, the DoA has proposed several activities to resolve the identified problems of the existing internship programme. In order to make interns productive and transformative in their practice, it is needed to have a developed teaching and learning mechanism. Such mechanism is derived from a discipline based practical knowledge, social and cultural consciousness that encourages both self and professional knowledge, educational relevance and productivity.

The conceptual framework developed with the purpose of monitoring and evaluating the internship programme composed with three main segments such as pre, ongoing and post evaluations. The model is presented at the figure 01 below.

Figure 01



Model Specification

Pre-stage of Evaluation

DoA believes that preparation of students for internship programme is very much important for a successful internship programme. One of the most important sides of intern preparation is the development of both personal and professional knowledge. This includes awareness as to how individuals, e.g., interns fit into a super-structure of educational, practical, technological, global and social ideals. A basic principle of preparation is the development of awareness which derived from the process of reflection and continuous critical examination of the various components of theory and practice.

Students spend three academic years within the university premises following number of course units. These different course units provide not only the academic knowledge but also the skills required for future career development. Department organizes workshops for second and third year students to enhance some of their work related skills such as fine dining, curriculum vitae writing, public speaking and presentation skills etc.

Further department organizes career fairs in collaboration with professional bodies of the country such as Association of chartered certified accountants (ACCA), Chartered Accountants (CA Sri Lanka), audit firms such as Ernst and Young, KPMG, PWC etc. It is expected to create training opportunities for students within the university and also this is an important opportunity for lecturers to assess student's preparation for training. Further, it makes an opportunity to observe students' preference on audit and non-audit sector firms, their preparation for an interview, the performance at an interview etc...

In addition, the DoA provides prior understanding and exposure to students before engaging in internship training. This creates a training atmosphere and career aspiration for undergraduates. This is facilitated through workshops and seminar series.

Further, students are allowed to select any training organization approved by the DoA. Training organizations are basically identified in two categories such as Public Practice Organizations (Audit Sector) and Non-public Practice Organizations (Non Audit Sector). Firms of Chartered Accountants and the Auditor General's Department are categorized to Audit sector and all other organizations are recognized as non-audit sector firms if the criteria set by DoA are satisfied. Student can work in Audit/Accounting/Finance departments/section of any listed company/ or any other organization, and they should be attached to the above mentioned departments/section which has a professionally qualified Accountant or a Degree holder in Accountancy/Finance from any recognized University. DoA grants the approval for non-public practice organizations by considering factors such as Number of employees, Annual turnover, Qualification of the supervising member into consideration. When a student finds a training placement and starts training, DoA enters in to an agreement with the training organization for the entire training period from the date of commencement. This agreement makes the training programme formalized and assign the responsibility to the respective training supervisor representing the training organization.

Students are strongly advised not to change their training organization during the programme since it disturb achieving set objectives and smooth functioning of the programme. However due to some reasons student is allowed to change the training organization, if only DoA accepts it as reasonable and with the approval from the training organization. In the event of changing training organization, student is required to inform the coordinator of Internship in Accounting in writing and required to obtain prior approval for such a change.

Further, students are strongly advised to adhere the set guidelines of internship programme. In an unavoidable circumstances students can request excuses from internship coordinator submitting a written letter or an email with evidences for the absence. Reasonable excuses are allowed and all the request letters and other documents are filed for future use and evaluation purposes. DoA considers the matter of compliance with internship guidelines for student evaluations.

Ongoing Evaluations

The interaction and evaluations that occur among students, practitioners, and faculty can be invaluable in measuring outcomes from the internship program and the entire program of professional instruction for future accounting professionals. The evaluations provide information about students' traits, knowledge, skills, and behaviors as well as perspectives on coursework, activities, and suggested curriculum changes. Integrating program and internship assessment is obviously appropriate since internships are part of the program and participants in the assessments are readily available. Securing similar information once the students graduate and relocate is difficult (Deborah, 2007).

DoA highly consider the matter of monitoring interns throughout the internship programme. The programme is well structured and monitored and guided with achievable tasks and deadlines. Many of the evaluation mechanisms are followed to maintain the level of the programme.

Comprehensive Internship Guide provides both industry partners and interns necessary information for the smooth functioning of the programme. This helps to ensure that training supervisors understand their responsibility to offer internship experiences that enhance students' learning, DoA internship guide is developed and shared with prospective supervisors and interns. These guidelines include an orientation of the student to the world of work, identification of professional level duties and tasks of significant quality and quantity, and a clear delineation of the relationship of the internship to the student's educational program.

Further, well-structured Internship Record Book is given to each interns at the registration to the programme. Throughout the internship, each intern have to maintain logs on his/her experiences and insights gained from the internship and the amount of time devoted to the internship.

The internship coordinator and all academic supervisors evaluate the progress of interns at the end of each month conducting Internship Progress Review Meetings. Interns discuss their progress with respective academic supervisors and take it as an opportunity to get their subject related issues clarified. A report on student's progress is maintained by academic supervisor and get the signature of student to monitor their participation for these monthly meetings. Department highly encourage students for these meetings as it is another mechanism of evaluating the progress of interns by their supervisors.

This reflection and communication on a timely basis is believed to be important not only to the learning process but is also helpful in the oversight of the internship experience. It is important for the on-campus internship supervisor to have an open line of communication with the intern and the employing supervisor. Limitations on time and travel make it extremely difficult to conduct regular on-site visits. However, efforts should be taken to ensure that expectations for the experience are being satisfactorily met (Deborah, 2007).

On the other hand, the proposed Digital Recording and Evaluating System (DRES) for internship will reduce the alteration/manipulations of daily training records preparation and it facilitates for continuous evaluation while linking all parties online.

Interim Evaluation Mechanism is also followed by DoA for monitoring interns' progress and taking them into the right track. At the end of first semester, when they complete half of the training programme, interns have to complete the given Master Summary and submit the record book to the internship coordinator for evaluation. Both academic and training supervisors have to certify the work performed and mentioned by intern before this submission.

Further, site-visits to places where students are engaging in training ensures that the students obtain authentic training and thereby it enhances the popularity and confidence of the programme among the industry partners.

Post Internship Evaluations

To ensure that the internship is an academic experience, which is subject to public scrutiny, various program requirements to be implemented. These program requirements provide excellent opportunities to not only assess the student's internship experience but also to evaluate the student's written and oral communication skills. Student, employer, and coordinator should be concerned with achieving an appropriate fit from the beginning. A learning application should be completed and a conference between the student and the academic representative to communicate the requirements and expected outcomes should occur prior to the student's enrollment in the internship (Deborah, 2007).

At the end of the training programme feedbacks are collected from both academic and training supervisors about individual interns. This makes an opportunity for supervisors to comment on their interns, state their level of developments and suggest areas to be developed further.

Further each intern should complete a self-evaluation at the end of the training programme. During this survey, interns are asked to comment and rank them as they think improved significantly during the internship and answer several open-ended questions that can be used to assess the internship. Interns are required to evaluate themselves as to their personal and intellectual skills, interpersonal and communication skills, organizational skills, professional behavior and overall development. This Self-Assessment Report is prepared based on the criteria of International Education Standards (IES) presented by International Accounting Education Standards Board. Since the students are given the self-evaluation and program evaluation form as part of their internship record book at the beginning of the internship application process, the opportunity exists to communicate the importance of these traits to each intern at the beginning of his/her internship.

Interns are also requested to reflect on the internship experience and identify traits that they think improved significantly during the internship. As part of the self-evaluation and program evaluation form, students are asked several open-ended questions concerning the most beneficial and least beneficial aspects of the experience, impact of the internship on their future career goals, and suggestions for improving the internship program. Students are encouraged to be straightforward in their comments (Deborah, 2007).

In addition to the completion of internship record book interns are requested to develop a Case Study Report including minimum of three mini case studies. These cases are developed by them on the experience they gained from the internship programme. The development of case studies is done with the assistance of the academic and training supervisors. The purpose of this special task is to develop intern's research and application skills. They have to identify special issues relating to tasks they performed and have to apply the theory they learnt on solving those issue. Also it is expected them to suggest recommendations for identified issues. These mini case studies are evaluated by a panel of reviewers and selected best case studies are published in the Case Study Journal of Accounting which is annually published by the DoA.

In addition to all discussed tasks interns have to face for a viva voce examination at the end of the academic year, which is the final examination of the internship programme. Intern's performance is evaluated by panel of examiners and assess them for grading. The marking scheme is also well structured and standardized with many of the evaluation criteria.

By having students share their experiences, faculty also benefit by the integration of those experiences into more traditional classroom activities and discussions during or following the internship. For faculty who have become involved most directly in the internship program, the internships have provided a means for professional interactions with those accounting and finance professionals who have supported and participated in the program. In addition, the training supervisors provide a pool of support for professional programs conduct within the university, for fund raising efforts, and for student recruitment and placement efforts (Deborah, 2007).

To enhance the rapport between industry partners and academia, DoA annually organizes an academic forum named as "IDeA Night". It is the felicitation ceremony for the successful interns and training providers of the internship programme for the year. This mechanism creates a platform for building network with training providers. It will provide an opportunity to recognize and attract best recruits for their organizations. Eventually the IDeA Night has become a talent show for students and a noble opportunity to present and show their skills to industry partners.

Conclusion

Comprehensive program assessment involves multiple methods and measures of students' performance and program outcomes (Deborah, 2007). The evaluation mechanisms discussed and suggested by this article can be used to develop and strengthen internship programmes and they will be highly important for those who expect mechanisms to develop assessments of interns' performance. These assessment mechanisms can be considered as important components of a comprehensive assessment program. Further enhancement of internship programmes are much valuable in improving the quality and standard of overall academic programs for future accounting professionals and for accreditation of degree programmes. It will also provide valuable insights into the development and enhancement of the core competencies for entry into the accounting profession while improving the quality.

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