

Exploring College Students' Perceptions of Internship

Experience

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Abstract

This case study aims to explore college students' experiences and perceptions of participating in internship programs. As internship experiences were considered one of the valuable experiences for undergraduate students, their perceptions may reflect the outcome of the program. Three college students who are from southern part of Taiwan and have completed the internship program were invited to join the study. Interviews were employed to explore the experiences and perceptions of these case students. Analysis focused on investigating their perceptions, involving attitude, motivation and values for the internship experiences. Findings show that participants considered the values they perceived for joining the program were more significant than the professional skills gained. The study also shows that even though students have experienced unexpected frustration during the internship, they still acquire valuable future insights from the experience. This research indicates that students' internship experience cannot fulfill their expectation; there is a gap of cognition between the job and reality. By investigating the perceptions of the internship participants, the internship recruiters could have a better preparation for both participants and the companies joined the program.

Key Words: internship, perception, internship experiences

Introduction

As Gupta, Burns and Schiferl (2010) argue, the final goal of education is to assist students process the knowledge from school and make the theories into practice. In recent years, universities and colleges in Taiwan are promoting the internship program in hope that knowledge in campus can be implemented in the workplace (Chen & Chen, 2010). With the increase of the participants of the internship programs, previous research has indicated the beneficiary of the internship programs such as it can reflect interns' the future career (Lehman & Quick, 2011) and increase the job stability in students' early future career (Richards, 1984).

The outcome of the internship experience is always the critical concern for the students who participated in the program. As Gupta and Schiferl suggest that a positive internship experience is the primary factor to student's internship satisfaction, student's satisfaction toward their internship experience will affect the effectiveness of their internship experience. Hence, instead of observing the job they do and the quality of the intern position, the focus of the internship experience is the perceptions that students perceive themselves during the internship.

As a university student who just finished the internship program, I discovered that not only for the students who worked in the same department have different interpretation toward their experiences but the students who worked in the different departments. The primary motivation for college students enroll in the internship could be identical whereas the expectation and the outcome can be distinct after they complete the program.

This study aims to explore college students' perceptions toward their internship experiences and the differences between students who used to work in different industries. It is the study's intent to enhance our understanding of students' perceptions of the internship program therefore may assist future participants in

choosing the program and relevant preparation.

Literature Review

Many previous studies have investigated student's perceptions of their internship experiences in recent years. A brief review of relevant studies over the issue of internship and students' perceptions toward their internship experiences are as follows:

Internship defined

The practice of the internship program is for students to leave school for one to two semesters to improve the experience of industry relation for their future career. The program itself can provide student the experience that cannot be otherwise acquired in school (Kim & Park, 2013). Previous studies indicate five major benefits of internship such as 1) applying the knowledge in the classroom to the practical use, 2) enhancing the knowledge of industry, 3) clarifying their interests and ambitions, 4) reducing the unfamiliarity in the field, and 5) faster adaptation that students are convinced they will acquire from the internship (e.g., Coco, 2000). Whereas, not all of the internship experiences will lead to the way that student had expected. With a number of students completed the internship program annually, anticipated result varies (Day, 2012).

From the industries perspective, internship program provides benefits to all different participating parties (Swanson & Tomkovick, 2011). When the faculty people enabled interns to learn skills, administrative or routine tasks, not only do help the employers to finish more tasks, students also acquire certain basic skills from the industry. This cost-effective manner serves the internship program as a win-win situation that benefits both participating parties.

Perceptions of the internship experiences

Students' perceptions toward their internship experiences can be defined variously. Green, Graybeal & Madison (2011) argued that student's internship perceptions were the perceived-values that students apply during the internship which can develop into important traits that employers valued. These traits are the important elements to reach the ultimate goal of the internship, which is to clarify the future career of the participants. Yongmei, Jun and Weitz (2011) also categorize perceptions as the attitudes students possessed which will influence the satisfaction and the outcome of the internship experience.

In their study, Johari and Bradshaw (2008) reveal that students' intrinsic motivation of enrolling the internship program will affect their attribution to the job, self-efficiency and competence.

Since the major purpose of the internship is to increase participants' work-related experience, to enhance the efficiency of the internship program, plenty of research had focus on distinctive aspects of internship experiences to evaluate students' perceptions. Hergert (2009) discovers that a valuable internship was influenced by students' perceived value, demographic profile and the structure of the internship. McCaffery (1979) mentions that students' satisfaction toward their internship experience was based on the extension of their future career exploration rather than the intern job itself. The perceived perceptions from the internship program could be the representation of the supplementary results of the program (Narayanan, Olk & Fukami, 2010).

With the above review of the studies on internship perceptions from various industries, it could be argued that how knowledge was transferred to practice in business industries (Gupta, Burns & Schiferl, 2010; Moghaddam, 2011; Swanson & Tomkovick, 2011) has been the major focus of attention. Several industry internship

experiences such as public service, tourism and medical science were identified respectively in some literature (McCaffery, 1979; Chen & Chen, 2010; Kim & Park, 2013; Matthew, Taylor & Ellis, 2012). However, few studies intend to connect the investigation of perceptions from different aspects across industries.

Since the major purpose of internship is to benefit students from working experience, whichever factors that could affect students' outcome of the internship should be taken into consideration. The exploration into students' perceptions would enhance our understanding of internship experiences and therefore benefit the development of appropriate internship programs. Thus, the aim of this study is to analyze students' perceptions of internship experiences, perceived-values and attitudes toward their internship program. Given above, the two research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What are the perceptions of students who participate in the internship program?
2. What are the different or similar perceptions between students who have internship in different departments in one particular industry?

Research Methods

This study aims to explore the perceptions of the students who participate in the internship program and to investigate the differences in three students who worked in different departments. The study compared and contrasted such perceptions between three students from different departments: Marketing, Research and Development and General Administration. Qualitative research methods were applied to investigate the perspectives of the college students toward their internship experiences. Three college students attending different colleges and universities located in Taiwan were invited

as interviewees. They are Zola, Wade and Nance (pseudonyms), who have participated in internship programs and work in the IT industry. The following Table illustrates the three students' backgrounds and internship details.

Table 1. Demographics of the three participants

Participants	Gender	Age	Period	Department	Major
Zola	Female	22	3 months	Marketing	English
Wade	Male	22	6 months	Research and Development	Electronic Engineering
Nance	Female	22	3 months	General Administration	International Affairs

The first participant, Zola, attended an oversea internship which was different from other two participants. According to Zola, this internship experience was a novel experience for an English major who had never travel abroad before. As for Wade, he was the only participant who had the closest practice of the professional skills. As an Electronic engineering major, Wade was expecting a practical experience in the internship program. Finally is Nance, who considered herself without any professional skills that could be applied during the internship program. The purpose for her to enroll the program was to explore her future career. All of the participants are from southern part of Taiwan and they are all in their senior year.

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data source in the present study. Interviews were approximately 45 minutes to one hour and were conducted in Chinese in order for the researcher to better understand the participants. Each participant was invited to sign on the informed consent. Besides, the interviews were recorded for further transcription and analysis. All the data were analyzed using “line coding” (Strauss & Corbin, 2008).

Findings

Motivation for joining internship programs

The motivation for students to take part in internship programs were found to be influenced by students' personal interests and the enthusiasm of novel experience. Findings from this study show that the participants acknowledged that the internship experience is a mean to combine their working interest and intellectual curiosity. As one of the participant described, the intrinsic motivation for enrolling internship program is the interest of the job. However, when this perspective cannot meet the actual condition, the motivation could be altered if there are no other factors drew them back. For example, Wade indicated how the frustration during his internship can make over his motivation.

Nobody will be willing to do something you're not interested in. However, I have to say, if you don't get paid, the interest will decrease tremendously. Like me, I have to work from 8 A.M. until night. If you don't earn money from this, you will become weary. Then you will lose your motivation. (Wade, interview, 2013/12/18)

From what Wade mentioned, as the experience brought up the weariness; the intrinsic motivation could be dissolved. The other factors such as salary or other workfares will replace the motivation for students to apply for the internship.

Being college students who have limited experience, students found out that they were eager for new experiences. When the knowledge from school was restricted to theories, most of the students might start to search for a new experience to implement their specialties even the work may not fit in their interests. As an English major, Zola, explained that how she was fascinated by the new working environment, she addressed her motivation was not based on her own interest but the novel experience.

[The company] It was all about electronics, so actually, I don't have interest in it. Frankly speaking, the major reason for me to be there [internship] is that it could offer me a cheapest way to go abroad. My purpose is for going there is not about the internship program, it's about going abroad. (Zola, interview, 2013/12/5)

Zola had no interest of the internship program itself; on the other hand, she was intrigued by the overseas' environment. Hence, the motivation of the students could diverge the meaning of the internship experience.

Since the motivations of the students apply for the internship varies, the research shows that the motivation cannot be supported by the interest. During the internship period, some of the participants claimed that they had lost their motivation of attending the internship. However, as the participants found their new interest and experience, the perceived values could become their new motivations for them to carry out the internship program.

Perceived value - interpersonal skills

As the purpose of the internship program is to benefit students, their perceived-value with the internship experience is one of the critical issues for this research. Findings from the research reveal that three of the participants all encountered the situation of interpersonal relationship. Therefore, the interpersonal skill was considered as a challenge and value for all of the participants in their internship experience. One of the participants, Nance, suggested that the interpersonal skill was an obstacle for her.

If you're talking about the work I have during the internship, they're all the same. There were no challenges for me. However, [I think] the hardest thing for me was to read other people's mind. I think there were no difficulties for my work. The hardest part of my internship was that I had to interact with other people. (Nance, interview, 2014/3/6)

Although Nance regarded the interpersonal skill as a difficulty in work, she valued the skill much more than the job. Instead of enhancing the professional skills in the workplace, the importance of additional values during the internship experience could overtake the primary value of students.

Learning things that never noted from schools could also surpass the other factors that happened in the internship program. As students' understanding toward internship's purpose had converted to the values other than specialties, they might regard the attitude that they perceive was more significant. For instance, Zola had transformed her focus of the internship into interpersonal relationship which was the most precious experience she considered herself had gained from the internship experience.

Because they [the company] didn't have work for me, I think the problems I've encountered were all about interpersonal relationships of the colleagues. [...] So I think I have more problems on those [interpersonal relationship] kinds of issues. While I think I've learned the most from that. (Zola, interview, 2013/12/5)

Zola claimed that there were not so many tasks for her during the internship. She assumed that the interpersonal relationship was the crucial element in the internship experience. Apart from the anticipated difficulties that Zola assumed she may encounter during the internship, the unexpected obstacle, which was the interpersonal issues, could exceed the other benefits in the program.

As the research indicated that the internship experience cannot be limited to the tasks that were assigned for improving students' professions; the benefits which were not included in schools were essential to the students. Although most of the participants regarded internship as a practical practice of knowledge, most of the lesson they learned from the program were refining their capacity rather than

knowledge.

Self-perception

The perceptions students had during the internship program were consisted of the students' self-awareness and personal attitudes. Findings indicate that students discover the importance of activeness during the program. Students often noticed that during the internship, employees in the company may not have the passion for teaching students. Consequently, participants of the program cannot fulfill their requirements of the new knowledge. As the situation during the internship grew worse, introspection was the mean for students' to seek for solutions. One of the participants from this study declared that when the problem happened, he had to work out their own way.

The engineers can't teach you everything. [...] You can't keep asking questions throughout the day. That means you're asking them to open a class especially for you and teach you everything. So I found out that everything was based on your own action. You have the right to chose what to do. How to make yourself learn more from this internship, you have to decide by yourself. [...] (Wade, interview, 2013/12/18)

When Wade realized that he could not ask the employees to spare time and teach him everything, he knew that was the time he had to help himself. Starting from the frustration of the limited knowledge that can be acquired from the program, Wade's self-awareness had driven himself to modify his behavior during the internship.

Another finding shows that students' attitudes was also an essential concern for students' self-perception. When participants found out that the internship experience was not identical with the expectation, they will reflect back to their own believes. The internship had been a responsibility for the students instead of a chance of

practicing the academic knowledge from school. From what Nance had described, she mentioned how she dealt with the dullness of the job that she was assigned during the internship.

Although in my mind, I think it's [internship] very boring. I still think I should try everything because I believe that can help me know what I want and what I need. So I turn it into a kind of game. Even it's a small chore, I'll just go and play. (Nance, interview, 2014/3/6)

Nance believed that participating in the internship program could help her find her future career. She considered the whole process as a compulsory procedure for locating her interests of the future career. Therefore, having the attitude of completing the program was the key for her. Although she revealed that the internship experience was not as interesting as it was, she asserted that keeping the attitude for completing the program was her responsibility.

Discussion

Frustrated anticipation

Although the perceptions of the internship participants have been various, all of them have been through certain stages. Figure 1 shows the changing perceptions of internship participants.

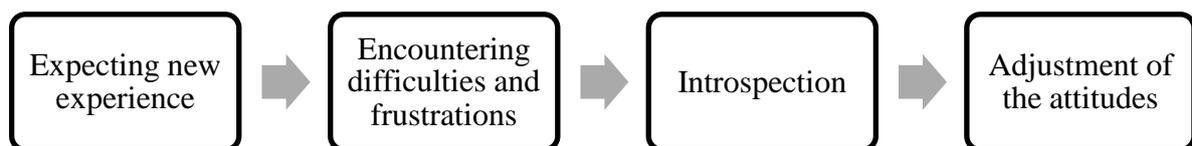


Figure1. Changing perceptions of internship participants

Most of the participants had some anticipation toward their internship work. However, the results could be varied from the participants had expected. As the all of the interviewees explained, they had encountered different situations that they could not handle. During the internship period, they had to adjust themselves in order to assimilate to the condition. As a result, the outcome cannot fulfill their expectations; they regarded the experience seldom reach their goals.

As Green, Graybeal and Madison (2011) indicated that the perceptions of students have during the internship program could be developed into a personal trait. After all of the participants discovered that interpersonal skill was a crucial ability they have to acquire, they had adjusted themselves to be eloquent. One of the participants, Wade, mentioned that *“Despite professional skills, I think being eloquent is very important. I was not very good at it. That’s why I was not very satisfied with my performance.”* As Yongmei, Jun and Weitz (2011) explained that participants’ perception will influence the satisfaction and outcome of the internship, the frustrations and the anticipation could affect the result of the internship program. When Wade considered himself was not familiar with the interpersonal skills, he had trouble to social with other coworkers. Consequently, the internship experience Wade had acquired was not as good as he had expected; he was not fully satisfied with his internship experience. In addition, the internship experience was linked to students’ expectation. As the perceptions of students have been influenced by other factors such as frustrations, the outcome could be altered.

Different academic implementations for internship departments

Due to the different majors and different intern departments that the students have come from, the result of the internship were both similar and different at the same time. As Lehman and Quick (2011) argue that the internship can clarify students’

future career, the participants of this research may have a different interpretation.

Since Nance and Zola had an internship in the marketing and general administration departments, both of them had found out the importance of the language proficiency. During the internship period, both of them discovered that the profession from school could not assist them as much as they thought.

I need a breakthrough for this [English proficiency]. I still need to improve my English. However, for the people who major in business, they don't have too much use for this job; even I major in English, I also don't have too much use for the job either. So I know that after this time, I will not apply for this kind of job. (Zola, interview, 2013/12/5)

From what Zola addressed, she had a doubt of profession that could be implement to her work even she considered language proficiency was an important ability in the marketing department of a foreign company. The result shows that as Lehman and Quick proposed, students did have a clear picture for their future career; the insufficient for the job will reveal their future difficulties that could drive students to a different path.

As Coco (2000) declared that internship experience could help students apply the knowledge from school and a rapid adaptation to the future career (Richards, 1984), one of the participant, Wade, endorsed that the knowledge he had learned from school had assisted him to a rapid adaptation in work. He described “*School teaches us how to use the equipment. You have to know how to use the equipment in order to finish the product that the engineer assigned to you. We cannot expect engineers teach us everything. It is very important in our department.*” Wade regard his basic requirement for the internship was the knowledge that school had taught him. To accomplish the internship program successfully, Wade asserted that he had efficiently implement the skills he learned from school.

Although three of the participants major in different subjects, all of them had asserted Richards' (1984) study that the internship program could help them have a faster adaptation to the future career. As for the validity of professional skill provided by school, it will depend on the departments that the students apply for internship. Students from different backgrounds could result in a different outcome of the internship program.

As the research shows, the perceptions for students attending internship could develop into other values that overtake the aim of the internship. Findings from this research have explored the changing perceptions of the internship participants. As the result shows, the perception could be transform into another important value that could direct the entire internship experience. Including the motivation and attitudes student have in the internship program, the changing values was the essential finding for this research. However, with the few of the participants from different backgrounds, this research was limited to the professions that student have. Therefore, the difficulties that student encountered were resemble to other participants. As the participants all discovered reasons for changing their perceptions, the dominating factor will need more discussion in the future research.

Conclusion

The study aims at exploring the perceptions of students who participated in the internship program. By interviewing three participants from different departments, the values of students would be revealed in this research. The study also examined the changing perceptions of the participants which divided into different values. The perceived-values were the potential traits that could benefits students' future career.

Findings from this research indicate that the benefits of the internship program

were the values that were perceived by the participants during the program instead of the professional training from the workplace. The interpersonal relationship is one of the crucial factors that the participants regard as the most essential portion of the internship experience. With regard to the difficulty of professional skills that students anticipated before enrolled in the program become the least concern for the program.

Another issue that this study has uncovered is that the frustration during internship programs could alter the participants' motivation to join the program. As three of the participants had discovered the internship experience was not as they expected, the motivation for students was derived into other attractions during the internship experience. Without the interests of the internship program, the validity of the program remains doubts.

As internship programs become more and more popular in the universities in Taiwan, the perceptions of the students should be considered as a key to the success of internship programs. This study has been limited in the number of participants, despite the fact that the case interviews make it possible for a flavor of "thick description". This study wishes to suggest that with a clear description and explicit goals of the internship program, students' internship experiences may be different from the frustrated experiences that the three participants have revealed in the present study.

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