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Learning and work: Efficacy of university internships for Syrian and Ugandan education students

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LEARNING AND WORK: EFFICACY OF UNIVERSITY INTERNSHIPS FOR SYRIA AND UGANDAN EDUCATION STUDENTS (Robert Jjuuko[1], Zahia Alhallak[2], Concetta Tino[3])

Abstract

Internships and related strategies within the diverse family of Work-Related learning pedagogies are widely credited for bridging the gap between the world of academia and world of work. Situated in a qualitative paradigm, this evidenced-based paper shows opportunities and challenges that define the efficacy dimensions of Syrian and Ugandan university internship models for students of Education.

1. Introduction

The ever-changing society inevitably alter workplace requirements to the extent that even the most job-specific qualified university graduate needs a focused orientation to match the demand. For decades, higher education everywhere is under pressure from economics and employers to prepare work-ready graduates (Brown, Hesketh & Williams, 2003; EU, 2014). In Uganda and Syria as elsewhere the graduates' employability agenda is laying bare the disconnection between university and labour market with a flagship education-work mismatch notion making headlines in academia and public policy discourses (PricewaterCoopers, 2008; Nuwagaba, 2012). As articulated by Moore and Morton (2017, p.592), the cost of poor work-readiness amongst graduates do 'not only holds graduates back from gaining satisfactory employment, but also has an inhibiting effect on the performance of employing organisations, and ultimately the broader economy'.

This evidence-based paper is a contribution to building the required knowledge base for bridging higher education and work connectedness. It focuses on university internships for education students in Uganda and Syria through a comparative study of efficacy dimensions of this Work-Related Learning and teaching model. The study is an extension of collective learning by a group of Master and Doctoral students from five countries, Denmark, Portugal, Italy, Syria and Uganda, who focused on Work Related Learning (WRL)and teaching methods within the framework of the 2017 International Winter School on Comparative Studies in Adult Education and Lifelong (COMPALL) at the University of Wurzburg.

The study explored and examined the efficacy of university internships for Syrian and Ugandan education students. The study main question was: how university internship programmes by the two case study universities promote work-readiness of education students? Specifically, it attempted to respond to two sub-questions:

(i) What are the experiences and perceptions of key stakeholders regarding the efficacy of the internships in the two countries?

(ii) What are the similarities and differences between the two university internship programs?

The search for empirical evidence on the experiences and perceptions of actors was informed by three interrelated comparative themes identified during the winter school, as well as indicative

literature review of local and global perspectives on internships and the wider Work-Related Learning pedagogy related to the employability and work-readiness of university graduates. The comparative themes or categories that guided the WRL group of research are: the role of actors, the policy and Work Related Learning in practice. To implement the data gathering process, these themes were dissected into sub themes to yield contextual data. The research revealed similar though variant opportunities and challenges which undercut the effectiveness and usefulness of university internships for education students in the countries.

2.Theoretical Framework

Tackling education-to-work transition challenges of university and college students, and the contribution of WRL pedagogies to their employability are global topical issues with varied practical and theoretical dimensions (Boffo, Federighi & Torlone, 2015). From the 1980s, ensuring the transition and work readiness of young people is a core ingredient in education and employment discourse with far reaching implications for the academia-industry relationship everywhere (Mihail, 2006; Moore & Morton, 2017). Business and trade interests are making monumental challenge to the autonomy of colleges and universities on matters relating to curriculum and pedagogy. The idea that recent graduates do not possess the required labour market capabilities is a common feedback by employers and other industry actors (Harvey, 2003; WEF, 2014).

Industry actors in Uganda and Syria as elsewhere are changing their practices of higher education teaching and learning to respond to the life and work prospects (Amer & Musa, 2015) and reducing skills mismatch (Akeel & Shahin, 2011). This discourse has come with its several related concepts with job or work-readiness and employability being the most relevant for this paper on efficacy dimensions of university internships.

Both work readiness and employability effectively communicate the increasing demand for a very important additional set of skills which give meaning to job-specific competencies. Several terms including soft, transferable, generic, employability are coined to represent what employers miss in the employability capabilities of students and graduates (Mihail, 2006; Frison, Fedeli, & Taylor, 2015). These skills include among others intrapersonal and emotional intelligence, excellent literacy and communication practices, good personal judgement, self-management and lifelong learning tools.

To train employable and work-ready graduates, universities rethink and innovate teaching and learning approaches which inevitably renew the 'practice makes perfect' tradition (Streumer & Kho, 2006, p.5). This response has brought WRL to the limelight of the university pedagogy discourse (Streumer & Kho, 2006). WRL, as an umbrella framework is helpful for defining and clarifying how labour market-responsive teaching and learning should be designed and implemented. Similar terms which are often used interchangeably include but not limited to work-based learning, situated learning, workplace learning and work-integrated learning (Frison, Tino, Tyner, & Fedeli, 2016). The myriad conceptions of WRL notwithstanding, the core is the interconnectedness of the two life realities: working and learning. WRL has got a shared tradition with social learning and constructivism grand theories' view of learning as a social practice (Brophy, 2002; Burke, 1995; Steffe, 1995). The three WRL constant notions of social interaction, partnerships and genuine social contexts are exemplified by the increasingly popular

concept of learning communities or communities of practice (Trif, 2015; Wenger, 1998). Internship as a WRL model potentially bridge the gap between the academic and world of work. It offers learners the opportunity to learn with and from the community. As observed by Lave and Wenger (1991) belonging to a community of practice, we learn practices, norms, values and understandings of the community to which we belong to (Burke, 1995). Widely credited for developing and nurturing work readiness capabilities, internships can be effective in its primary goal only if it is subjected to a set of principles and standards. Our synthesis of related literature informs our choice of four parameters for constructing a standard internship quality framework (Tovey, 2001; McNamara, 2009).

First, strong *university-industry partnership* which provides an enabling institutional arrangement for the actors to effectively engage with the internship experience. This partnership is useful for enforcing rules and procedures for ensuring compliance to quality and agreed work and learning standards. This institutional framework mirrors the education and employment policy provisions and frameworks.

Second, *students' theoretical preparedness* to facilitate learning and adaptation as they navigate their internship work and learning experiences is crucial. Internship work-learning tasks ought to be determined and undertaken within the Zone of Proximal Development framework (Fernández et al., 2015; Warford, 2011).

Third, linked to the above is *professional support and mentorship* with explicit responsibility on the university and workplace supervisors to counsel and mentor students before, during and after internship period. They ought to offer students with timely and enriching guidance, feedback and advice on accomplished and challenging tasks.

Forth, *prompt and adequate resources* to meet students'cost of living, transport, communication and related workplace learning materials. Time, space and related facilities for the workplace supervisors to effectively provide timely and regular support, and guidance as well as all the pedagogical and logistical support for university supervisors combine to influence the quality of internship processes and outcomes.

The design and implementation of this small scale empirical research and the subsequent data organisation, analysis and discussion, as presented in the proceeding sections, is located within this framework.

3. *Methodology*

This paper is based on data and information generated through a qualitative case study methodology which enabled the internship supervisors, students and graduates to narrate and describe their experiences and perceptions (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Qualitative research paradigm was deemed the most appropriate framework owing to its constructivist philosophical foundations that treasures the researcher's interaction with the creators of the reality thus enhancing a better understanding of their actions and interpretations (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Creswell, 2003). A comparative perspective to study was aimed at illuminating the forces and factors that define and influence the differences and similarities between the internship practices of the two universities (Reischmann, 2011; Bray, Adamson, & Mason, 2014; Popov, 2014). Two case study universities from Syria and Uganda were selected to constitute

the primary units of analysis. Syria with about 21 million inhabitants by 2011, is one of the Middle East and North Africa countries (MENA region) "which have the highest youth-unemployment rate (age 15-24) in the world due to problems occur at the interface between the education system and the labour market" (ETF, 2012, p.6). The first university established in 1920s. Until 2003, when private universities started to be licensed, higher education was state controlled and financed. On attainment of General Secondary Education (GSE) Certificate are eligible for a 4-5year university degree course. Syrian case study university is considered the largest and oldest public university in the country. It consists of several faculties, higher Institutes, intermediate institutes and a school of nursing. Each educational institution has its own internship program. The internship programme by the Primary School Teacher Education Department in the Faculty of Education, which is a compulsory component of the four- year education undergraduate degree course, is the focus of this study. The internship component known as Practical Education, is designed to prepare students to work in primary schools through the interactivity with schools'environment, training teaching process and getting a real experience (Mutlak, 2010).

Uganda, a British colony until 1962 with about 35 million people according to the 2012 census, is one of the youngest country in the world. The country's higher education journey started when the colonial government established a technical school in 1992 which was later transformed into a university in the 1960s (Tumuheki, 2017). In line with its neo-liberal policies, government opened up higher education delivery in the 1990s to private sector; and by 2007 over 37 institutions of higher learning had been established. While the state retains its regulatory function, financing and delivery is largely private (National Council for Higher Education, 2007). Ugandan secondary students are eligible for a 3-5 year undergraduate degree course on attainment of a good Uganda Advanced School of Education Certificate (UACE). The Ugandan case study university is one of the seven state controlled universities in the country. Its establishment involved the merger of different tertiary institutes, and is now organised under six faculties. Internship is increasingly becoming a common feature across all faculties. The 3-year Bachelor of Adult and Community Education undergraduate degree within the Faculty of Special Needs Education and Rehabilitation implements a mandatory internship programme. In addition to secondary data sources, 18 participants (Table 1) were purposively selected in equal proportions from Uganda and Syria as indicated in the table below.

Table 1. Research participants (Source: Authors'own)

Category of actors	sample	Reason
Workplace internship supervisors (WIS)	4	They are directly responsible for supporting and guiding the students during the internship placement period. They possess first-hand perspectives on the student's' behaviour, performance and learning practices.
University internship supervisors (UIS)	4	They directly deal with students' internship needs and requirements in line with university internship programme. Their insights into the internship efficacy influencing factors is crucial.
University internship coordinators (UIC)	2	On behalf of the university and faculty, they play an oversight role in ensuring compliance to technical and administrative procedures. Their perspectives on the policy and governance implications for internships is essential in fully understanding the practice

Current students	4	Their fresh memories of internship experience and what they are going through at the university helps to give the study a current perspective.
Graduates	4	The graduate's reflections on their internship experience in relation to current life and work realities is helpful in examining the usefulness of internships.

A purposive sampling approach was used to achieve maximum variation in the selection of the study participants (Coyne, 1997). The participants were engaged in standardized open-ended interviews which helped to yield in-depth and contextual evidence on the state of internship programmes at the two universities. The interview protocol covered the main categories for comparison and comprised of three dimensions; (a) Basic data about the participant, (b) Internship in practice (8 questions), and (c) personal view of internship (4 questions). (See the interview protocol, appendix.1). As is the tradition, the wording and sequencing of questions were determined in advance; and as Cohen and collegues (2007, p.349) observe, 'interviews enable participants to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view'. A degree of flexibility and creativity to yield more data beyond the predetermined questions was exercised. Open interviews essentially elucidate the line of investigation, and the researcher ought to be attentive to the responses of the respondents to detect emerging lines of inquiry for further probing. Data organisation and analysis was undertaken within the generic qualitative data analysis framework and procedure. Eighteen transcripts were created from the interview voices, and a rigorous coding was undertaken. Emerging codes were grouped into themes. The themes were further analysed and interpreted to describe the experiences and perceptions of stakeholders.

4. Findings

Findings are organised and presented under eight headings namely governance and management; aim, objectives and benefits; financing; timing and duration; tasks and skills; supervision and support; assessment and grading; challenges (Table 2). In Syria, primary schools are required by the Ministry of Education to provide internship placements for education students. In Uganda, the university used to undertake a survey for suitable institutions but this was suspended by the top university management on account of limited revenue base. Consequently, students now take the burden to search for placements from all sorts of government and non-government institutions. In both countries, the university writes a recommendation letter which the students use to approach host institutions.

Table 2: Key similarities and differences (Source: Authors'own)

Subcategories	First level of comparison	
	Similarities	**Difference**
Governance & management	The documented policies are there, but stakeholders do not have a complete awareness of them.	The internship places in Primary schools are guaranteed in Syria through the cooperation with Ministry of Education, while Ugandan students are responsible to search for suitable placements.
Aim & objectives	Link the theoretical knowledge with the practical experience and obtain the required skills	Ugandan students consider the value of connecting with future employers and developing job entry links

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Financing	The university paid for the internship supervisor however students cover their internship expenses	Some Ugandan students paid to workplace for getting an internship place
Timing and duration	The stages of the internship are almost the same; observing, partly participation and finally taking a complete responsibility of the work.	3 semesters in Syria vs. 2 semesters in Uganda
Tasks and skills	Internship tasks are determined within the context of routine operations of workplace institutions. Skills were described as a range of generic skills and attributes including self-confidence and communication.	
Supervision & support	Regular visits to interns by university supervisors	Syrian university supervisor accompanies his interns group to work place in each session while Ugandan counterpart depends more on indirect communication utilizing emails and social media
Assessment & grading	The final grade for students' internship performance is on the hand of universities supervisors	Assessment grid for Ugandan workplace supervisors.

The most important findings related to similarities and differences between the two compared countries were summarized in the table above, but more specific evidenced details are presented for each investigated subcategory:

Governance and management
In both countries, some internship rules and regulations exist; they are formulated at macro and meso levels but, at micro level, stakeholders don't seem to be fully aware of them. Syrian students mentioned the rules relating to their obligations, and grading procedures. The university supervisors singled out the rules relating to the roles. Their workplace counterparts presented modified extracts which relate to expected conduct of interns. In Uganda, the Government issued standing instruction no. 3 of 2011 to regulate the collaboration between public service institutions and training institutions for increased effectiveness of internships (Lwamafa, 2011). However, none of the stakeholders expressed awareness of this policy. University supervisors, students and graduates mentioned some departmental guidelines relating to daily routines of students and basic supervision tips. While one of the supervisors said that there is a Faculty Industrial Training and Community School Practice Policy, no documentary evidence could be obtained apart from the supervision leaflets and forms issued by the department. Another supervisor stated:

> "I am not sure whether there are codified rules that are gazetted or what, but what I know is that at some stage as a department sat and agreed on the minimum kind of guidelines on when you go to supervise students, what should you look at, how should they write the report, how should you guide them; so, those were at the departmental level"

The workplace supervisors mentioned a set of unwritten guidelines that regulate the conduct of interns. The NGO workplace supervisor said that they require the students to sign the organisation code of conduct, to ensure compliance to institutional values and practices but they do not have a formal internship policy.

Aim, objectives and benefits

Participants' responses to the question on the purpose of internship programmes were largely descriptive of their understanding of internships as well as the related benefits. Both Syrian and Ugandan university supervisors identified as the aim of internship the training of students in order to allow them to be able to do the tasks related to the job, and obtain the required skills. They stated that the aim is to link theoretical knowledge with practical experience.

Current students and graduates share similar views but added the benefits of minimizing the phobia associated with job market entry; generating positive attitude and self-confidence through exploring work environment. A Ugandan graduate added the benefit of connecting with future employers and developing job entry links. Syrian workplace supervisors said that they offer internship placements because the programme helps the schools to keep abreast with modern methods, and to benefit from young students' ideas and energy. They also consider it a duty and social responsibility. One of the Ugandan workplace supervisors talked about his organisations' new thinking about internships as a recruitment strategy. He said: "some interns have been retained in the teaching department; we have five teachers in social work, I am one of them".

Financing

In both Syria and Uganda, **t**he students meet the cost of the internship. The Ugandan students shared terrible experiences regarding the way they struggle to meet the internship-related expenses. The only direct cost that is met by the universities is for supervisor's transport, accommodation and related experiences. In Syria, internship placements are guaranteed free of charge by schools in accordance with the directive of the Ministry of Education. The only cost that the universities meet is for supervisor's transport, accommodation and related experiences. The teaching-learning materials for internships are provided by workplace institutions. Workplace supervisors receive no additional payment for their supervisory responsibilities. University supervisors in both countries decried habitual inadequate financing.

Timing and duration

In both countries, internships are organised after students have been exposed to the basics of their professions. In Syria, internship is undertaken during the third year in the second semester and in the second semester of the fourth year. Ugandan students take their 10-weeks internships in the second and third years in the second semester. The Syrian internship program consists of three phases with 25 hours in each semester. The university supervisors explained that starting the internship in the second and subsequent academic years is appropriate because students need to complete some courses and obtain the basic academic information related to concepts, theories, strategies and methods.

Tasks and skills

In both cases, internship tasks are determined within the context of routine operations of workplace institutions, and largely determined by the workplace supervisors. The role of university supervisors in this regard is apparently mute. The Syrian students and graduates mentioned lesson planning and teaching as the main internship tasks. Both workplace and university supervisors said that students undertake all the roles related to teacher position in class and outside the class including taking notes, observing and taking charge of their work. The Ugandan interns and supervisors mentioned more office administration-related tasks and general

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duties and less core adult and community education-related tasks. The students in both countries said that they developed a range of generic skills and attributes including self-confidence and communication.

Supervision and support
Supervision is mainly through support visits to interns by university supervisors. While interns are visited four times in a month in Syria, their Ugandan counterparts are visited once or twice during the entire internship period. Short sessions of not more than 30 minutes are held to provide feedback for Ugandan interns, their Syrian counterparts receive weekly sessions of 20-30 minutes. Workplace supervisors support the interns through assignment of tasks and subsequent follow-up just as the case is with regular employees. The Ugandan university supervisors mentioned use of telephone and emails in providing support and guidance to their students. One of them mentioned the use of social media including WhatsApp group to maintain a constant contact.

Assessment and grading
In both cases, internship assessment results part of the overall course grading and academic award, and university supervisors take the final decision on the final grade for students' internship performance. In Uganda, the university issues an assessment grid for both the university and workplace supervisors. In addition to the assessment of the daily and routine performance, students are required to write an internship report which is assessed and graded; it constitutes 60% of the overall.

Challenges
Further analysis of the findings reveals a number of challenges across the two countries. Starting with the fact that relationship between universities and the institutions which provide internship placements is largely loose without firm institutional arrangements to enforce the required partnership culture. This has multiple effects on the quality of relationships between the interns, the supervisors and entire work practices. In Syria, the student teachers are more less visitors because there is no real integration into the work environment, while the Ugandan experience might be slightly better, it is only contextual and dependent on the discretional approach of workplace supervisors.

The scanty financing upsets the conduct, effectiveness and enthusiasm of students and supervisors in varied forms. In both countries, limited financial resources for supervision affect the regularity, rigour and overall quality of guidance and feedback by both workplace and university supervisors. While students grapple with costs relating to transport, feeding and accommodation, supervisors are not entitled to any additional remuneration or bonus. In some instances, host schools and institutions do not have the budget for required learning-teaching materials to facilitate engagement in real work experiences by the interns.

Crowded workplaces, due to the ever-increasing number of students who seek internship, undermine the primary purpose of contributing to the development of students' work readiness. In Uganda, adult and community education students compete with their counterpart from other social science disciplines for internship placements. All the participants felt that nationally there are fewer internship positions owing to the fact that all universities require almost all their

students to undertake workplace learning, finding enough qualified supervisors amidst meagre financing by the university.

5. *Discussion*

Syrian university internship coordinator, just like his Ugandan counterpart, mentioned the challenge of dealing with large numbers of interns and this section deals with the historical, socio-economic and political forces that influence internship practices with a focus on two main comparison categories, policy and role of actors. Incomprehensive and disjointed policy formulation and enforcement impacts the efficacy of internships across the two countries in varied forms, but with shared underlying causes. Education development in both countries is rooted in a colonial legacy which haunts pre-and post-independence thinking to adequately respond to current education and employment realities (Mualla, 2003; Tumuheki, 2017).

Rethinking university education purpose and curricula from its colonial theoretical orientation to a vocational paradigm requires a competent and independent state with a clear and consistent ideological agenda. In both countries, the state is endemically weak and attempts to turn around university education are undermined by political and economic instability stemming from local and global forces, including civil strife, political violence, corruption and lopsided relationship with powerful global north.

At the macro level, the policy making and enforceable role of the Ministry of Education and related agencies in Syria is further undermined by the war (UNESCO, 2016). The inconsequential nature of internship standing orders by the Ministry of Public Service in Uganda is attributable to a weakening state with diminishing coordination capacity to ensure compliance to rules and regulations not only in relation to university education and internship but across entire social sector service delivery.

The weak university internship policy including the limited awareness amongst micro stakeholders in both countries is a reflection of poor governance and leadership that characterise university education. Internship management takes a laissez-faire orientation with universities playing a dominant role within a loose framework without enforceable quality assurance parameters, and this may be due to the employers' reluctance to claim active partnership in formulating the internship policy.

The scanty public financing of internships in both countries is largely attributable to the diminished role of the state in financing university education because of owing to the allegiance to global neo-liberal policies. While the case study universities are state-controlled, both government-sponsored and privately-funded students meet their transport, housing and related costs during the internship period. The policy of free of charge internship placements for the Syrian students is still possible due to the patronage nature of the relationship between the Ministry of Education and primary schools. In contrast with the adult and community education course which is not aligned to any specific ministry without such an infrastructure, enforcement of a similar policy is not tenable.

In addition to the decreasing interventionist and custodial role of the state due to increasing inclination to market-led structural policies, the unguided quantitative growth of university education, impacts the efficacy of internships in both countries. Opening access to higher

education for a wide range of students without a systematic and appropriate qualitative growth in terms of training academic staff, learning resources and facilities is evident in Uganda and Syria, and had had a negative impact on the internship arrangements, as all stakeholders agreed in the interview (large numbers of interns on one side and the lack of qualified university supervisors or funds on the other).

The evident dominant role of universities among the peripheral positions of host institutions in determining the design of internships points to a legacy of separate worlds of education and work, which is again a result of a deficiency in the policies at Macro and Meso levels, since the policy makers do not consider the valuable suggestions and recommendations revealed by academic researchers in the field of education and labor market. As a routine, the universities send out students for internships to fulfill academic requirements. The workplace supervisors and their institutions offer internship placements just as a gesture of goodwill which of course delivers to them some indirect dividends as revealed by one of Ugandan participants.

6. *Conclusion and recommendations*

The efficacy of internship in the two countries as judged from our IQF parameters is questionable given the current challenges as articulated in the sections on findings and discussion. While the timing of internships is largely promising, limited policy framework to guide and facilitate the actors in executing their roles, impedes the efficacy of university internships for education students in the two case study universities in Syria and Uganda.

Despite the numerous challenges, all stakeholders expressed trust and conviction regarding the value and usefulness of internship in nurturing work-readiness of students. In unison, students and graduates affirmed that internships are important for their career growth and development. Workplace supervisors in both Syria and Uganda support students, and relate well with university staff amidst their routine busy schedules. The supervisors gave testimonies of compliance to work rules and norms by the students. University supervisors glorified the great cooperation of workplace supervisors and their institutions in accepting, guiding and mentoring interns. There was evident willingness and preparedness of micro level actors to do better, once macro and meso policy frameworks and commitment are put in place.

In this perspective, there are great possibilities for increased effectiveness and usefulness of internships once deliberate efforts are taken to design internships with clear quality indicators and outcomes derived from the parameters of strong university-industry partnership, student's theoretical preparedness, professional support and mentorship, and prompt and adequate resources.

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