

## INTERNSHIPS EXPERIENCE OF PR STUDENTS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Ms. Liana Mat Nayan, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia

Norazimah Abd Rashid, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia

Nor Ez-Zatul Hanani Mohamed Rosli, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia

Audrey Anak John, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia

Afi Roshezry Abu Bakar, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia

Contact Details:

Email: [liana@utar.edu.my](mailto:liana@utar.edu.my)

Phone: +060163455771

### *Abstract*

As stressed by Tsetsura (2011), how people understand and imagine public relations (PR) depends on the ways professionals discuss and describe their jobs and explain what they do to themselves and to others. Therefore, interactions during internship provide students with opportunities to learn. Thus, this study examined student's experience during their internship, and findings showed that most of the respondents stressed that there is so much difference from what they knew from books and classes and what they have learned during internship. They commented that knowledge that gained in class is insufficient for them to know about what happen in industry.

Keywords: internship, PR student, experience, culture

## **1.0 Introduction**

Internship programs are designed to provide part-time field experience opportunities that students can carry out while simultaneously enrolled in other academic courses (Khalil, 2015).

Meanwhile, internships as voluntary, temporary work placements, often undertaken by students at the university and college levels, have been addressed as win-win situations for both employers and internees (Coco, 2000).

For science courses such as medicine, internship is a must. However, prior researchers found that internship is a period of intense physical and emotional stress. Most studies have focused on the negative effects of residency training where cynicism, anger, depression, and burnout occur at high rates during residency and may be associated with substance abuse, marital discord, poor job satisfaction, isolation, and professional reprimand (Levine, 2006).

While in social sciences a person needs experience for theoretical application. Thus, in social science the internship has become the best known model for combining an academic qualification with work-relevant training and experience. It has become an acceptable approach of learning in all types of institutions (Hook and Fern, 1983). Since the public relations (PR) discipline is such an applied science, educators support the use of teaching strategies and assignments that encourage students to put theory into practice (Fall, 2006)

Besides, for a company to have quality personnel, it takes time for it to be professionally trained and also financial expenses for training and motivation. A professional internship can be an important professional experience if the applicant aspires to a career in that profession. The internship programs provide a complex practical experience required to deal within the real-world workplace (Negrut et al, 2015).

## **1.1 Internship in Public Relations**

In public relations (PR) discipline, after arranging the phrases used by PR academicians, Kendall (1980) concluded that an internship is media-related work experience at an on-the-job location, supervised by a professional practitioner, involving a student enrolled in an academically organized program requiring full-time work which provides salary and credit during a specified term (quarter or semester).

Meanwhile, in discussing about the importance to have PR internships, Gibson (1998) stressed that three issues need to be considered;

- 1) The importance of curricular, where majority of the scholars and practitioners agreed that internships play a meaningful role in PR education.
- 2) The implications toward employment, where it is undeniable that internships have direct employment implications especially in the era of downsizing, and this is more important than ever.
- 3) The perceptions of practitioner, which most of PR professionals perceive the potency of internships in education.

Thus, internships have always been considered a valuable learning experience by members of the PR academy. The 2006 report by the Commission on Public Relations Education recommended a supervised work experience as one of the core courses for students majoring or pursuing an emphasis in public relations (Daugherty, 2011).

Later, Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSA) suggests internships can enhance a student's resume, portfolio, networking, and technical skills (Beebe, Blaylock & Sweetser, 2009), and this is parallel with Evetts (2011), which also mentioned that the professional values emphasize a shared identity based on competencies which is produced by education, training and apprenticeship socialization, and sometimes guaranteed by licensing.

As stressed by Tsetsura (2011), how people understand and imagine public relations (PR) depends on the ways professionals discuss and describe their jobs and explain what they do to themselves and to others. Therefore, interactions during internship provide students with opportunities to learn by observing how seasoned professionals, their mentors, handle ethically sensitive situations.

## **1.2 Purpose of Study**

However, although PR academicians stress the importance of internship experience as part of the success in the career-hunting equation, student perception is reality. Tied also to the issue of student attitudes, academicians need to keep their hands on the pulse of how students view the overall *value* of these field experiences (Fall, 2006).

Due to this need, this study aims to contribute to the limited qualitative literature on internship experiences from PR student's perspective.

For research objectives, focus had been given to perception of students toward internship, and poor qualities of internship.

## **2.0 Methodology**

In-depth interviews of 15 purposively selected students from a PR department at a Malaysian private university established the crucial data for this study. The purpose of using in-depth interview is to enable the understanding of subjective meanings of the interns' lived experiences (Cheong et al., 2014).

Most respondents were in semester one of final year which 11 of them were female, and four were male. All of them had undergone their internship at various companies in Malaysia. Seven of the participants were chosen as they were supervised by the interviewers during their internship while another was chosen as they were taught by one of the interviewers. Some of the interview protocol questions were adopted and modified based on the questionnaire developed by D'Abate, Youndt & Wenzel (2009).

Experiences are grouped, analyzed, and compared to identify the patterns and relationships of meaning. Questions addressed the perceptions toward internship, the poor qualities of internship, and ways to improve the internship experience.

## **3.0 Findings**

### **3.1 Perception about Internship**

#### **3.1.1 Exposure to new knowledge/skills**

From prior studies, Khalil (2015) concluded that the benefits of internship may be classified as personal (e.g., self-fulfillment, influence, perseverance, and productivity), interpersonal (e.g., team-working, effective communication, and leadership), academic (e.g., critical

thinking, knowledge acquisition, and working and learning independently), employment (e.g., technical skills, vocational development, and employability), and civic engagement (e.g., awareness of community problems, contribution to society, and voluntariness).

In the data collected, most of the respondents do not have clear knowledge on the job scope of a PR practitioner as they believed that PR are mostly used in event management, and this has encouraged of neglecting the importance of dissemination of messages or even media relation. Furthermore, most of the respondents participated in the interview undergo their internship in event management company, hotel or marketing compared to be solely in PR department.

However, when almost reaching the end of internship, most respondents admitted that they have learnt so many new things during the internship. As found by Daugherty (2011), all these internal immediate rewards included skills acquisition (writing, editing, professional experience in social media, production of printed materials), obtaining real-world experience, getting class credit to graduate, discovering if the field is for them, and gaining a better understanding of the field.

Interestingly, respondents also mentioned that ethic and protocol are very important during their training especially during event management. This pattern is parallel with Saat et al. (2014) which has concluded that students in the Malaysian higher education have some kind of ethical exposure during their studies and while attending industrial training.

However, although the level of ethical awareness among students is fairly good, industrial training has minimal impact in improving or developing students' ethical awareness. The impact is such because students who undergone internship may have observed certain behavior that they thought are acceptable in a workplace (Saat, et al, 2012).

### **3.1.2 Exposure to new environment**

All of the participants agreed that experience is an important element to provide students with insight on the field. Internship allowed them to get the experience which is also a good opportunity to let them to learn and exposed to operation in the industry so that they can compare and contrast what they had learn in class.

Besides, experience helps a lot when PR practitioners deal with crisis. Experience provides insight to aids decision making when dealing with crisis. It builds up the confidence of the PR practitioners as they are familiar with the crisis and master the proper way to resolve the crisis. Participants concluded that knowledge that they gained from books and classes is just a basic for them to handle matters, however, practical judgment and experience is the most important element when deal with real crisis. As mentioned by Khalil (2015), internship provides an experience of "learning by doing".

Meanwhile, internships have been addressed as powerful career boosters, and, indeed, researchers have generally found positive associations between internships and career-relevant variables. Study proven that internships also have a crucial effect on subsequent academic outcomes. These effects hold controlling for prior academic achievement, and they hold for both advantaged and disadvantaged students (Binder et al, 2015).

However, there is one issue that need to be considered by PR academicians and organizations, which is regarding the salary of interns. Even most of the scholars, practitioners, and

organizations agreed about the significance of salary when we referring to the definition of internship by Kendall (1980), however more than half of the respondents in this current study did not get any money rewards from the organization during their internship.

The study done by Beebe et al (2009) found that paid interns are indeed more satisfied with their work experience than unpaid interns. That said, unpaid interns are not *unsatisfied* and they also exhibit high levels of satisfaction with their experiences, indicating pay is not the sole determining factor of satisfaction.

### **3.1.3 Enhancing experience**

In general, prior research has viewed internships as a positive developmental experience for higher education students, having found linkages with a number of favorable outcomes (Benzing, 2004). For example improved perceptions of job fit in the early career (Richards, 1984), a greater degree of ambition (Pedro, 1984), and higher job satisfaction (Gault et al, 2000).

The addition of internship experiences on the resume may constitute a competitive edge, enhancing students' probability of being selected for a job vacancy (Silva, 2015).

Moreover, they mentioned that most of the company is more likely to hire someone which possessing experience in the industry. Members which gone for internship in the company getting higher possibility to be hire by the company compared to others as they are familiar with the operation of the company. This shows that the experience that one's own can act as a stepping stone to get the offer in industry.

Therefore, for those respondents working in event management companies, 3 months were insufficient for them to thoroughly learn or acquire necessary skills as they need to be engaged in long-term strategic planning with both internal and external public. Furthermore, respondents choose to utilize the acquired PR skills and knowledge in other field of work instead in PR as discovered.

## **3.2 Poor Qualities of Internship**

### **3.2.1 Exposure to multi-tasking**

During internship, the companies have the opportunity to assess, monitor and to train a potential employee in correlation with personnel policy. The students can help the companies in the case of staff shortages (occasioned by the holidays), or overloading of the staff in certain periods (Negrut et al, 2015). However, majority respondents in this current study agreed that this policy or rule regarding giving tasks to interns need to be discussed further.

According to one of the respondent, by giving multi-tasking work to students during period of internship, it is clearly shows the failure of the company in providing opportunities that enhance autonomy. For respondent, CEO or top management, have not recognized PR and communication as first level management function. Other respondents also agreed that most of the management only recruits PR students as the medium in helping them to create event and for multi-tasking job, during student's internship.

### **3.2.1 Poor Management Style**

It is suggested that the culture of the organization affects the experience during internship and subsequently influence the development of basic skills (Rodzalan and Saat, 2012). For example, respondents in this study highlighted how poor management style contributes to the weakening their authority and decrease the effectiveness of their duties during the internship. One of the respondents talked about his experiences while he was doing marketing, when a client contacted him, then, he was forced to put the client on hold and consulted his superior for further action. These caused loss of confidence and interest of clientele on him and also his company.

After his disclosure, the others also affirm that they face the same situation during their internship. As PR practitioners might engage in crisis management or more to marketing now, the negative attitude of top management lead to inability of the practitioner to act accordingly.

In fact, another respondent mentioned that the in-house practitioner, it is mostly controlled by Head of Department and likewise for other company to be controlled by boss whom have insufficient knowledge of the profession in the field, PRs' are always been referred to be doing to technical task.

All these poor management style can be related with the descriptions of poor site supervisors as concluded by Daugherty (2011):

- Someone who does not take the time to converse with the intern or discuss any issues and does not understand that an internship is a learning experience.
- Someone who is too busy to teach you anything and does not give you proper directions to complete tasks.
- Someone who does not care about what the intern is doing or does not have the time to discuss needs and concerns of the intern.

In China, the collaborations between universities and selected PR firms have offered students great opportunities to acquire professional experience. Prior to starting a project, students would communicate frequently with the internship center to learn an organization's culture, structure, management styles, and its various publics (Zhang et al., 2011). Previously, Creedon and Al-Khaaja (2005) suggest that by adding non-Western case studies to prominent textbooks in PR would provide a launch pad for classroom discussion.

## **4.0 Discussion and Conclusion**

Findings in this study showed that when evaluating PR students experience during internships, the students ranked learning new knowledge/skills, exposure to new environment, and enhancing experience. While, for multi-tasking policy and poor management style are the poor qualities of internship.

It has been highlighted that most of the respondents stressed that there is so much difference from what they knew from books and classes and what they have learned during internship. They commented that knowledge that gained in class is insufficient for them to know about what happen in industry.

Internship has giving them a chance to adapt themselves in the industry. It is undeniable that an internship which provide students with the chance of learning something which may be

totally different from what they learnt in the class, can also influencing a student's career choice either to remain or to change (Kim & Park, 2013).

Furthermore, there is wide variance in internship policies, in the number of hours of credit, the number of internships taken, degree of voluntariness, compensation, and type of evaluation. Some differences in internship programs are acceptable, but there are some basic precepts applicable to all internship systems (Gibson, 1998). One of them is students should be exposed with cultural diversity.

This is relevant as current PR defined by Sriramesh (2009) stated that "Public relations is the strategic communication that different types of organizations use for establishing and maintaining symbiotic relationships with relevant publics many of whom are increasingly becoming culturally diverse." The "relevant publics" in this definition are becoming increasingly "diverse and global" and therefore in order to be effective, PR practitioners should be "well educated and sensitized to communicating in a global environment" (cited in Sriramesh and Duhe, 2009). Therefore, PR students should be trained to go beyond single identity markers when creating PR plans and learn to recognize that people have multiple axes of identity (Gallicano & Stansberry, 2011).

Specifically for students of PR, recognizing multiple dimensions of diversity is crucial because such understanding will provide a good insight into how global PR operates and is practiced. Understanding diversity beyond race, ethnicity, age, and gender may help to discover why PR practitioners succeed or fail when they utilize similar campaign strategies in different countries around the world (Tsetsura, 2011). And, by staying in Malaysia which very rich with cultural diversity, academics, practitioners, and students should take this opportunity to produce and develop a future PR practitioners that competence in managing cultural diversity in any situation.

Finally, organizations should remain to offer internships as a means to guarantee a stable flow of motivated employees and to help students gain a better understanding of themselves and the ever more complex world of work (Benzing, 2004).

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