

Employers' Perception of the Law Syllabus Content of Practicum Course in Universiti Utara Malaysia

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Abstract - Practicum courses are guided work experiences that consist of a project undertaken for or in collaboration with an organization. This study is an exploratory research carried out to evaluate objectively the present structure of the practicum course for LL.B students at University Utara Malaysia. The study examined the employer's perception of the syllabus contents of practicum I and II. The specific aspects of the syllabus contents examined were the employer's perception towards the objectives of the course, learning outcome and the duration of the course. The items also include the content as to the administrative, report writing, judgment, supervisory aspect and the method of assessment. The study was carried out amongst the experience legal practitioners who were the assessors of the students undergoing practical training at their placements. Data was collected using a survey questionnaire. A total of 51 questionnaires were sent out. The total responses received were 43 (83.31%). The findings indicate that the majority of respondents generally (more than 80%) agree that the syllabus contents were good and suitable for practicum I and II courses. Nevertheless, they are of the opinion that there is a need to extend the existing duration of the practicum training for the students.

Keywords - law syllabus, practicum course, exploratory research

INTRODUCTION

Practicum courses are guided work experiences that enable students to link theory and practice. They generally consist of a project undertaken for or in collaboration with an organization. A report by the Minister of Higher Education Advisory Council meeting at Academia-Industry 2007, stating the number of graduates in 2006 who failed to get a job after 6 months of graduation is more than 50,000 graduates and the number keep increasing from time to time. He also suggested that the practicum programme as one of the strategy to overcome this problem (Abdul Razak Chik *et. al.*, 2009).

The report also stated that the main issues that cause problems, especially for *Bumiputera* graduates in the job market is weaknesses in their soft skills such as problem solving, decision making, and effective communication in English. Similarly, in the Academic-Industry Consultative Meeting 2008 which was held on August 12, 2008, Minister of Higher Education Malaysia, YB Dato' Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin in his speech explained that the close relationship between higher education institutions with the industry is very important. This relationship also enables higher education institutions to identify the problems that prevent students from getting the job in the future. The universities also need to look back at the curriculum being offered and it should be in line with industry requirements.

Therefore the researchers are of opinion that there is a need to review the curriculum of practicum courses of the law programme. The research questions of the study are as follows: Whether the UUM law programme practicum courses content is relevant? What is the employers' view on the basic skills of law students who undergo practical training? Further, whether the syllabus is adequate to nurture the skills and professional practice of law students of UUM? Hence, the purpose of the study is to examine the employer's perception of the syllabus contents of courses Practicum I and II of law programme in Universiti Utara Malaysia. The specific aspects of the syllabus contents examined were the employers' perception towards the objectives of the course, learning outcome and the duration of the course. The

items also include the content as to the administrative, report writing, judgment, supervisory aspect and the method of assessment.

There are two compulsory practicum courses, Practicum I and Practicum II and students should pass these courses. Practicum I is for law students in semester four and their placement is for four weeks at the High Court and Lower Court. Practicum II is for the sixth semester students who have completed Practicum I. During the practicum, students will be placed in the organizations involved in the legal field such as law firms, the Attorney General Department, the Legal Aid Department and others. During the practicum period, the student will be under a supervisor appointed by the organization and also acting as their assessor. Students are subject to the organization in terms of working hours, rules and regulations and at the same time to always adhere to university rules.

For Practicum I and II a number of objectives have been outlined and these include:

(a) students will gain new experiences, develop personality and enhance soft skills,

(b) students will acquire skills to do research, analyze information and write a good report, and

(c) students will be able to expose and empower themselves to face the future job market. The learning outcomes of these course will enable the students (a) to plan tasks, make decisions and solve problems based on theoretical, conceptual and practical knowledge, (b) adapt social and communication skills effectively in the work environment, (c) obtain a high level of professionalism, ethics and accountability in all tasks assigned; and (d) apply the skills to do research, analyze information and write a good report.

FRAMEWORK

Practicum program has been recognized as an important tool for students to adopt a professional career in the future (Seiglar, Gentry & Edwards 1979; Weinberg 1986). Practicum provides an opportunity for students to integrate theory with practice learned in the real working environment (Price 1987 as cited in Greg Ryan, Susan Toohey & Chris Hughes 1996; Weinberg 1986). It provides a platform towards

professionalism in career development (Abdul Razak Abd Manaf & Ahmad Shukri Abdul Hamid 2002).

Practicum can also be used as a mechanism to evaluate the effectiveness of a programme as well as the courses offered by the institute of higher learning. Placement of students in the organizations can create a good relationship between the university and the industrial sector towards the development of higher education system (Abdul Razak Bin Chik *et. al.* 2009).

According to Wetfeet (2004), practical training is beneficial to the students in developing the necessary skills, expose to the working environment, familiarize students with the organizational structure and build a good relationship with the industry. In addition, it can also increase the financial resources of the students if the organization provides remuneration during the practicum.

Meanwhile supervision is an essential aspect and should be given attention in ensuring the success of the practicum courses. This is to monitor student's performance as well as getting feedback from the organization (Abdul Razak bin Chik *et. al.* 2009). In this context, students are fully placed under the supervision of the appointed officer of the organization during practical training. According to Grady (1988), supervisors from organization are considered as the most appropriate natural evaluators because they have direct contact with students at most of the time during practical. They also possess the current acceptable performance standards in the field as cited in Abdul Razak Abdul Manaf & Ahmad Shukri Abdul Hamid 2002).

The evaluation process is another essential aspect to determine the level of performance achieved by students during the practicum. In this regard, the perception of organizations towards students which evaluated by appointed officer is important in measuring the performance of students. According to Kirkpatrick (1995), evaluation exercise carried out can measure changes in behaviour resulting from a training program. Meanwhile according to Ariffin Zainal (1985), the purpose of assessing the training is to get feedback which seeks to enhance, update and improve a training programme in the future. It is also to evaluate the effectiveness of training and to determine whether the training assist to change attitudes and behaviours as well as to evaluate the results of training programme.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The study determined the employer's perception of the law syllabus content of practicum course.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is an exploratory study with a purpose to seek perception of employers regarding the syllabus contents of Practicum I and II of the Bachelor of Law in UUM. The finding of the study is essential to enhance the marketability of law graduates of UUM. The survey was conducted among the experienced legal practitioners who are the performance assessor (in their capacity as employers) for UUM law students who undergo the practical training in their organization. Sample of the study consists of 17 High Courts in each state in Malaysia, 21 legal firms, 12 departments and a corporate company. Total number of respondents was 51. However, the researchers received 43 responses (84.31%) out of the total number which consists of 12 respondents from the courts, 19 from the law firms, 9 from the Legal Aid Department, 1 respondent from the Office of State Legal Adviser and 2 from the Attorney General Department.

The data gathered in the study are primary and secondary data. Primary data obtained through surveys. While the sources of secondary data, obtained from the practicum rules and guidelines. In addition, reference is also made on legal documents, including books, journals, bulletins, and others which are related to the study. For the purpose of the survey, questions were developed based on the provisions contained in the regulations, guidelines and previous studies. These questions were first pre-test to assess the reliability of the instruments and to ensure that these questions clearly and easily understood. The findings of the reliability test showed a high strength of reliability (0.8 – 0.983).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study showed the balance between the gender of the respondents: male 21 respondents (48.8%) and female 22

respondents (51.2%). Types of organizations involved in this study include the courts, the Legal Aid Department, the Office of the State Legal Adviser, law firms and the Attorney General Department. The results showed the majority of the respondents are from the law firms which are 44.2% followed by the courts and Legal Aid Department, 27% and 20.9% respectively. The fewest respondents were the Attorney General's Department 4.7% (2 persons) and the Office of the State Law Adviser 2.3% (1 person).

(a) Employers' View on the Syllabus Content of Practicum I

The suitability of the course syllabus for Practicum I is focused on the course objectives, learning outcomes, the duration, method of assessment and the semester in which the students underwent practical training.

This study revealed that more than 80% (OB1: $M= 4.4872$, $SD=.64367$) of respondents agreed that the objectives of the course are appropriate and good for students to gain new experiences, develop personality and enhance soft skills in legal professional practice. They also opined that the course is good for students to acquire skills to do research, analyze information and write a good report (OB2: $M= 4.2051$, $SD=.73196$). Respondents also agreed that the course is good to expose and empower students to face the future job market (OB3: $M=4.4359$, $SD=.68036$) Overall, the respondents concluded that the law students are able to achieve the prescribed objectives stated in the course syllabus of Practicum as in Table 1.

Table 1: Course objective, learning outcome, duration and semester for students to undergo practicum i

Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Min	SD
OB1: New experience	39	3.00	5.00	4.4872	.64367
OB2: Research skill	39	3.00	5.00	4.2051	.73196
OB3: Exposure to working environment	39	3.00	5.00	4.4359	.68036
LO1: Working plan	39	2.00	5.00	4.1538	.87475
LO2: Communication skill	39	2.00	5.00	4.2564	.88013
LO3: Ethical behaviour	39	1.00	5.00	4.3590	.87320
LO4: Research skill	39	2.00	5.00	4.1538	.81235
D1: Duration (Lower Court)	39	1.00	5.00	3.6410	1.11183
D2: Duration (High Court)	39	1.00	5.00	3.5385	1.12029
S1: Semester	37	2.00	5.00	3.8108	.81096

As shown in Table 1 above, approximately 70% (LO1: $M=4.1538$, $SD=.87475$) of the respondents agreed that the learning outcomes of Practicum I had encouraged the students to plan their tasks, make decisions and solve problems based on theoretical knowledge, conceptual and practical. In addition, 76.9% of the respondents cited that the syllabus learning outcomes had motivated students to adapt to social and communication skills effectively in the work environment (LO2: $M=4.2564$, $SD=.88013$). The result of this study indicated that students had gained a high level of professionalism, ethics and accountability in every task assigned to them by the respondents (LO3: $M=4.3590$, $SD=.87320$). They also opined that the course syllabus had good outcomes for students in research skill, analyzing information and writing good report (LO3: $M=4.1538$, $SD=.81235$). Overall the respondents of this study are satisfied that the Practicum I course syllabus had successfully achieved the learning outcomes set in the course syllabus. However, one of the respondents commented that the practical student is poor in the learning outcomes.

This study also examined the period of practical training at the courts throughout Malaysia. Table 1 above, showed indicated that 48-53% (D1: $M= 3.6410$, $SD= 1.11183$), (D2: $M=3.5385$, $SD=1.12029$) of respondents agreed that the period of practical training at courts

which is 2 weeks at the High Court and 2 weeks at the lower court should be extended. Meanwhile 67% of the respondent opined that the students should undergo the practical training for Practicum I at the end of semester four (S1: $M=3.8108$, $SD=.81096$).

As depicted in Table 2 below, the respondents' views on the suitability of the course contents of the syllabus of Practicum I varied. A significant majority of the respondents agreed to the following topics are relevant and useful for students for the purpose of final report writing, i.e aspects of jurisdiction (JC: $M=4.3077$, $SD=.76619$) and governance of courts of civil cases (CG: $M=4.1795$, $SD=.75644$), handling civil (CC: $M=4.3333$, $SD=.77233$), tort (CC: $M=4.1795$, $SD=.85446$), criminal (CriC: $M=4.4103$, $SD=.75107$) and juvenile cases (JC: $M=4.2308$, $SD=.90209$), originating motion (OM: $M=4.3590$, $SD=.74294$), judgment debtor summons (DC: $M=4.3333$, $SD=.86855$) and writ of seizure and sale (SS: $M=4.3158$, $SD=.73907$)

However, only 65% of the respondents agreed to the relevancy of the administrative aspects of the bureaucratic of the court (BC: $M=3.8462$, $SD=1.06471$), death inquiry 59% (DI: $M=3.7105$, $SD=1.03735$) and small claims procedures 71% (SC: $M=3.9487$, $SD=.88700$) to be part of the syllabus contents.

Table 2: Course content of practicum I

Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Min	SD
JC: Jurisdiction	39	2.00	5.00	4.3077	.76619
CG: Governance	39	2.00	5.00	4.1795	.75644
CB: Bureaucracy	39	1.00	5.00	3.8462	1.06471
CC: Civil case	39	2.00	5.00	4.3333	.77233
CT: Tort	39	2.00	5.00	4.1795	.85446
OM: Originating motion	39	2.00	5.00	4.3590	.74294
DC: Debtor claim	39	1.00	5.00	4.3333	.86855
SC: Small claim	39	1.00	5.00	3.9487	.88700
CriC: Criminal case	39	2.00	5.00	4.4103	.75107
JC: Juvenile case	39	1.00	5.00	4.2308	.90209
SS: Seizure and sale	38	2.00	5.00	4.3158	.73907
DI: Death inquiry	38	1.00	5.00	3.7105	1.03735
JE: Judgment enforcement	39	1.00	5.00	4.2821	.85682
JudE: Judicial ethics	39	3.00	5.00	4.2308	.74203

The result of the study shown in Table 3, refers to the supervision method used for Practicum I for the law programme which involves (a) employers' supervision (SI: $M=4.3947$, $SD=.67941$) (b) lecturers' supervision (S2: $M=4.1579$, $SD=.91611$) and (c) final practicum report (S3: $M=4.3684$, $SD=.63335$). Majority of the respondents also opined that the assessment aspect which encompasses (a) assessment of employer (AS1: $M=4.0513$, $SD=.88700$), (b) assessment of lecturer (AS2: $M=3.9487$, $SD=.99865$) and (c) practicum report assessment (AS3: $M=4.1795$, $SD=.99662$) is suitable for practicum training.

Table 3: Supervision and assessment method of practicum I

Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Min	SD
SI: Employer	38	2.00	5.00	4.3947	.67941
S2: Lecturers' visit	38	1.00	5.00	4.1579	.91611
S3: Practicum report	38	3.00	5.00	4.3684	.63335
AS1: Employer	39	2.00	5.00	4.0513	.88700
AS2: Lecturers' visit	39	1.00	5.00	3.9487	.99865
AS3: Practicum report	39	1.00	5.00	4.1795	.99662

(b) Employers' Views on the Syllabus Content of Practicum II

Table 4 below provides the overall results of the respondents' perception (i.e. employers) as to the suitability of the syllabus content of Practicum II which consist of the objectives of the course, learning outcome and the duration of the training.

Based on the results, the majority of the respondents generally agree that the objective of the course is relevant and (OB1: $M=4.4359$, $SD=0.71800$) for the students to acquire new experience, develop personality and improve soft skills aspect. The respondents also agree that the course objective is suitable (OB2: $M=4.3333$, $SD= 0.73747$) for the students to acquire research skill, analyze information and improve report writing. The results also indicate that they agree (OB3: $M=4.4359$, $SD= 0.71800$) the course objective is suitable to prepare the students for the working environment in the future.

Examining the learning outcome of the course, the majority of

the respondents agree (LO1: $M=4.3077$, $SD=0.83205$) that the students would be able to plan their task, make decision and solve problem based on theoretical, conceptual and practical aspects. They are also of the opinion that the student would be able (LO2: $M=4.3333$, $SD=0.80568$) to adapt their communication and social skills effectively in the working environment. The results also indicate that the respondents agree (LO3: $M=4.3077$, $SD=0.89307$) that the students would be able to achieve high standard of professionalism, practice ethics and accountability in any task assign to them. They also agree (LO4: $M=4.1538$, $SD=0.81235$) with the learning outcome of the syllabus that this course would produce student who are able to apply research skill, analyze information and produce good report writing.

Nevertheless, the majority of the respondents less agree (D1: $M=3.7179$, $SD=1.02466$), (S1: $M=3.8108$, $SD=0.88700$) with the duration (i.e. the duration of 1 month) and semester (i.e. in semester 6) provided for the students to undergo their practical training under Practicum II syllabus.

Table 4: Course objective, learning outcome, duration of the practicum and semester for students to undergo practical training

Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Min	SD
OB1: New experience	39	3.00	5.00	4.4359	.71800
OB2: Research skill	39	3.00	5.00	4.3333	.73747
OB3: Exposure to working environment	39	3.00	5.00	4.4359	.71800
LO1: Working plan	39	2.00	5.00	4.3077	.83205
LO2: Communication skill	39	2.00	5.00	4.3333	.80568
LO3: Ethical behaviour	39	1.00	5.00	4.3077	.89307
LO4: Research skill	39	2.00	5.00	4.1538	.81235
D1: Duration	39	1.00	5.00	3.7179	1.02466
S1: Semester	39	2.00	5.00	3.9487	.88700

The results in Table 5 indicate the respondents' perception towards the suitability of the syllabus content of Practicum II pertaining to administrative aspect, client counseling process, proceeding and

ethical aspects. Majority of the respondents agree (AD1: $M=4.2308$, $SD=0.77668$), (AD2: $M=4.3590$, $SD=0.74294$) that the content of the syllabus in respect of administrative aspect which involve administration of justice and litigation are relevant. They are of the same opinion that the administrative aspects in relation to client counseling process, which include: a) interview client (ADC1: $M=4.0000$, $SD=0.91766$) b) legal opinion (ADC2: $M=4.0256$, $SD=0.87320$) and c) public relation with the client (ADC3: $M=4.1026$, $SD=0.78790$) are all relevant with the content syllabus of Practicum II. The results also indicate that the respondents agree that the proceeding aspects which include a) preparation of pleading (P1: $M=4.4359$, $SD=0.8202062$) and b) case study (P2: $M=4.3500$, $SD=0.89299$) are relevant. Examining the syllabus content on ethical aspect which include a) professional ethic and b) confidentiality, the respondents also agree (E1: $M=4.3750$, $SD=0.70484$, E2: $M=4.3750$, $SD=0.74032$) that these aspects are relevant with the syllabus content of Practicum II.

Table 5: Administrative aspect, client counseling process, proceeding and ethical aspects

Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Min	SD
AD1: Administration of justice	39	2.00	5.00	4.2308	.77668
AD2: Administration of litigation	39	2.00	5.00	4.3590	.74294
ADC1: Counseling – interview	39	2.00	5.00	4.0000	.91766
ADC2: Counseling – legal opinion	39	2.00	5.00	4.0256	.87320
ADC3: Counseling – public relation	39	2.00	5.00	4.1026	.78790
P1: Pleading	39	2.00	5.00	4.4359	.82062
P2: Case study	40	2.00	5.00	4.3500	.89299
E1: Professional ethic	40	3.00	5.00	4.3750	.70484
E2: Confidentiality	40	3.00	5.00	4.3750	.74032

Table 6 shows the results of the perception of the respondents regarding the methods of teaching/supervision and assessment for syllabus content of Practicum II. The majority of the respondents generally agree that the method adopted in the syllabus, which consist of supervision by a) employer (S1: $M=4.2308$, $SD=0.77668$), b) lecturers' visit (S2: $M=4.0000$, $SD=0.82717$) and c) practicum report (S3:

M=4.2308, SD=0.93080) are suitable and relevant. They are of the same opinion regarding the assessment aspect of the course which includes a) employers' assessment of 25% (AS1: M=4.0250, SD=0.97369) and c) practicum report assessment of 50% (AS3: M=4.1250, SD=1.09046). Nevertheless, the respondents less agree on the assessment made by the lecturers' visit of 25% (AS2: M=3.9500, SD=1.06096) as provided for the students in the syllabus content of Practicum II syllabus.

Table 6: Supervision methods and assessment

Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Min	SD
S1: Employer	39	2.00	5.00	4.2308	.77668
S2: Lecturers' visit	39	2.00	5.00	4.0000	.82717
S3: Practicum report	39	2.00	5.00	4.2308	.93080
AS1: Employer	40	1.00	5.00	4.0250	.97369
AS2: Lecturers' visit	40	1.00	5.00	3.9500	1.06096
AS3: Practicum report	40	1.00	5.00	4.1250	1.09046

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study conclude that the law students are able to achieve the prescribed objectives and learning outcome of Practicum I. The overall content of the Practicum I is relevant and able to nurture the skill and professional practice of law students. Further, the respondents generally agree that the syllabus content of Practicum II also achieves the objectives of the course as provided. On the whole, the respondents are of the opinion that the learning outcomes provided in the syllabus content of Practicum II are relevant. Nevertheless, the majority of the respondents less agree with the duration and semester provided for the students to undergo their practical training under Practicum I and II. It appears that there is need to extend the existing duration of practicum training for the students.

It is interesting to note that based on the overall result of the research, the management of the UUM has accepted the recommendation to extend the duration for Practicum II from 1 month to 2 months. In addition, the semester provided to undergo the training has been changed from semester 6 to semester 8 for Practicum II.

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