

Towards Developing a Pro-Entrepreneurship Internship Program: An Appraisal of Southern University Model

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Abstract

The main purpose of this research is to identify the problems of traditional internship programs conducted at tertiary level educational institutions and propose a practical model of the internship entrepreneurship program. The qualitative research method has been used here to explore the existing problems of traditional internship programs, and rationalize the necessity of entrepreneurship internship program of Southern University Bangladesh (SUB) as an alternative to the traditional internship program. In this regard, three focused group discussions were conducted with three main stakeholders, namely the faculty guide, the internship supervisors of the host company, and the student interns. The study discovered different weaknesses of traditional internship programs conducted in the university, including the limited scope of internship, noncooperation by the host companies, and the limitation of time. However, all the stakeholders are on the same page regarding the incapacity of traditional internship programs in developing the entrepreneurial spirit and aspiration among the interns. The study proposed the SUB model as an independent way to conduct an entrepreneurship-friendly internship program at tertiary level education, which may help the concerned to overcome the challenges of a traditional internship program. This research may contribute to the body of knowledge of higher education management and may support academia to develop an entrepreneurship development centered curriculum.

Keywords: Entrepreneur, Intern, Higher education, Tertiary education, University, Internship, Entrepreneurship.

Introduction

Entrepreneurship Development (ED) is one of the preconditions of the socio-economic development of every developing nation (Leff, 1979). It facilitates economic prosperity through the mobilization of scarce resources, innovation, and employment generation (Valerio, Parton & Robb, 2014). The outcome of an effective entrepreneurship development program may bring political stability and social order in society. Entrepreneurship development is a critical factor that heightens the continual growth of an economy where the universities could be a development partner to foster an entrepreneurship-friendly ecosystem in society (Huda, 2016). Entrepreneurship education is the heart of ED. It is the key determinant of a successful ED program in a country (Khoury, Elmuti & Omran, 2012). To develop a pool of meritorious citizens for public and private services is the most visible functions of the private universities in Bangladesh. Hence, the universities must perpetuate their responsibility to create an entrepreneurial society to spin the wheel of the economy (Audretsch, 2014) and maintain social stability in the country.

The educational system of a university is highly expected to nurture a creative environment to develop initiators of modern enterprises where a pro entrepreneurship academic course needs to be offered instead of traditional courses (Lüthje & Franke, 2002). The prime role of universities is to engraft technical, interpersonal, and social skills within the graduating students. In the emergent knowledge society, these skills are very important for a graduate to secure a flourishing career in the industries (Laurillard, 2002). However, most of the private universities of Bangladesh designed their academic curriculum according to the need of the industry, and an internship program is very common in all the professional courses irrespective of science, arts, and commerce. This program helps a graduate student to be acquainted with his/her job responsibilities and job culture.

The internship program provides a real-time opportunity to apply the knowledge earned from the academic curriculum and acquire professional skills to develop employability skills. On the other hand, the traditional internship program is failing to provide learning opportunities and environments. Most of the host organizations are engaging the interns' in odd jobs. Yeasmin (2018) termed it as trivial work. She also mentioned the challenges of an internship program like the noncooperation of the mentors, hiring fewer interns, and failing to provide a challenging environment of real-time learning. Loretto (2019) also echoed the same in his article. Hence, another harsh fact is, the present job market in Bangladesh is very volatile, and the unemployment rate is very high for highly educated students (Neazy, 2019). To encounter this grim situation mentioned above, a specialized entrepreneurship internship program is very evident to facilitate entrepreneurial skills among the students (Dobratz, Singh & Abbey, 2014) where the universities must play the promising role to create entrepreneurs by redesigning the internship programs towards entrepreneurship to nurture the spirit of an entrepreneur among the graduating students.

Southern University Bangladesh (SUB) is trying to stand out from the crowd regarding entrepreneurship development (ED) programs. The Business School of the university is going to initiate long-term

comprehensive programs to foster entrepreneurial aspiration among the graduating students. The SUB model of ED will facilitate a student to take a real-life journey of entrepreneurship by providing an internal and external internship program. The nine-step sustainopreneurship development model (Refer to Figure 1) will shape a student to advance their career as an entrepreneur, and the model may substantiate the idea of an entrepreneurship internship program to be applied by all the tertiary level education. The objective of this study is to explore the problems of traditional internship programs to legitimize the necessity of pro-entrepreneurship internship programs proposed by SUB.

Statement of the Problem

An internship is an integral part of an academic curriculum of all the professional courses across the world. It bridges between the theory and practice and orients the students with professional life. It is an opportunity to exercise generic skills and to build up day one skill. Though this widely used program is found effective in developing employability skills, it has failed to energize entrepreneurial zeal among the graduating students. The traditional internship curriculum of the universities and the orthodox corporate culture are impeding entrepreneurship development through the internship program. In Bangladesh, the number of higher education institutions is growing like mushrooms (Trines, 2019), and the effectiveness of an internship program is a question mark as the host organizations are failing to provide adequate service to an unmanageable number of interns. The preoccupation of the host organizations providing internship is hindering the standard of the program. Most of the host organizations of Bangladesh are employing the internship student's in clerical jobs and failing to provide a challenging environment of hands-on learning. As a result, learning opportunities from this program is fading away, and the program is becoming a burden to academia, an additional hassle for industry and a painful journey for the students as well.

Bangladesh is a country of overflowing population, and a large number of citizens are emerging youths. As the job market is shrinking

rapidly, the employment opportunities for highly educated graduates are also squeezing. Our present unemployment rate is 4.37%, and it is rising among the citizen cluster who has attended the tertiary level education and the rate of around 46% of the total unemployed (Neazy, 2019). As a result, career war among the millennial generation is apparent. On the other hand, employers' testimony towards the standard of graduating skills of university students is not up to the mark (Mamun, 2011). Therefore the access to the job market is very challenging for them (Islam & Salma, 2016). Considering the volatility of the present job market, Bangladeshi universities shall maneuver immediately towards entrepreneurship development program to generate the scope of employment and divert the next generation graduates towards self-employment.

It is also very alarming that internship opportunities in Bangladesh are shrinking day by day. Due to the rising number of universities, the ratio between the passing graduates and the internship employability of the corporate houses is becoming uneven. As a result, most of the corporate houses of Bangladesh are struggling to accommodate interns in proportion to the number of eligible graduates and becoming unstable to conduct a standard internship program as well. To encounter the challenges of the current internship program development of an independent and self-sufficient internship program is necessary by the universities to create an in-house scope of internship and entrepreneurship development as well. This study is a whistle for a consensus to revise the existing system of an internship program that had failed to maintain the standard of an internship program to ignite the fire of entrepreneurship among the graduating students.

Southern University Bangladesh offers a unique EDP, namely "Sustainpreneurship Development," to the undergraduate students of business studies. Students enroll in the mandatory core course "Entrepreneurship Development" and start their journey to the path of entrepreneurship. This intensive program follows nine phased process (Figure 1) to flourish the spirit of entrepreneurship among the young learners (Huda, 2016). The main endeavor of this study is to identify the challenges of existing practices of conventional job-based

internship programs conducted at the university level and appraises the SUB model as a complement to traditional internship programs that may facilitate both entrepreneurship and Intrapreneurship among the students.

Review of Literature

Entrepreneurship and the Role of Academic Institutions

To ignite entrepreneurial zeal among the students has become a prime role of 21st-century universities, and at the moment, higher educational institutions are the gateway to entrepreneurship education (Salem, 2014). Universities are considered to be the most responsible entities to develop an entrepreneurship friendly society and suppose to be entrepreneurial in this regard (Audretsch, 2014). Entrepreneurship education of universities fosters industrial growth (Galloway & Brown, 2002), and it is a critical determinant of venture support (Hansemark, 1998). Universities ought to contribute to developing the entrepreneurial aspiration among the graduating students (Küttim et al., 2014; Kume, Kume & Shahini, 2013) and fostering self-confidence, risk-taking attitude, locus of control within them to choose a career as an entrepreneur (Gürol & Atsan, 2006). However, ED is an action-oriented program to facilitate the students to learn entrepreneurship by practical exercise, and its outcome is one step ahead than traditional classroom sessions (Rasmussen & Sørheim, 2006). The instructors of the ED program should be trained thoroughly in addressing the psychological part of entrepreneurship to motivate the learners to take a career as an entrepreneur (Souitaris, Zerbinati & Al-Laham, 2007). According to Neck & Greene (2011), the method approach of entrepreneurship education considers that entrepreneurship could be learned through experimentation and practices where the educators are to ensure the environment for successful learning.

The Notion of Entrepreneurship Internship

An internship is not only an opportunity for a student to obtain necessary managerial and business skills through a practical learning session, but it opens the window of entrepreneurship for

them (Tovey, 2001; Galloway, Marks & Chillias, 2014). The success of an undergraduate internship program is strongly correlated with career success, and it helps the graduating student to acquire initial employment (San Tan & Ng, 2006). Wexhe (2018), Dilts & Fowler (1999), Azila-Gbettor & Harrison (2013) emphasized that interns must be provided with the learning opportunities to explore them as potential entrepreneurs in the future and to start a small business. Sunyoto & Ulum (2017) had conducted a study on the internship program of mechanical engineering students and found an effective relation between internship programs and the interest of students to become an entrepreneur. They also suggested the internship department of the organizations to increase the eagerness towards entrepreneurship.

Interventions of Entrepreneurship Internship

The internship is an integral part of an academic curriculum of all the professional courses, and this program is also being extended in entrepreneurship studies (Dobratz et al., 2014). As interventions to entrepreneurial internship Nigerian Government has taken an internship scheme to coach the potential entrepreneurs and established vocational centers in this regard (Odia & Odia, 2013). Hence, Ruch (2014), in his master's thesis, emphasized the matchmaking issue between the interns and the Norwegian organizations and suggested that interns have to choose startup companies to develop the zeal of entrepreneurship. The hosts of the internship program need to create an entrepreneurship friendly environment to develop entrepreneurial dexterity among the learners. Another study by Galloway, Mark & Chillias (2014) emphasized the necessity of an internship program in the IT sector to help the graduates to be self-employed. However, students' self-interest towards acquiring business skills through internship is a key factor of a successful internship program, stated by Liu, Xu & Weitz (2011). On the other hand, organizations hosting the internship program must have proper policy guidelines & objectives for the internship program, and they must be well communicated to the learners to direct the attention of the interns towards learning (Ruch, 2014).

Kuratko (2005); San Tan & Ng(2006) had coined that; enthusiasm among the students should be energized to delve into the original issues of business problems and opportunities at the time of the internship. Such initiatives may drive the interns to initiate a small venture of their own in the immediate future (Holyoak, 2013). Hence, Dobratz et al. (2014) had attested internship opportunity as a platform to develop social networks and later capitalize on this prospect to frame a business network. According to Valerio, Parton & Robb (2014), internship and mentoring are the key module of entrepreneurship education, and the universities must attach the student with emerging entrepreneurs who will volunteer to mentor the learners. Heriot & Lahm (2009) have coined that, entrepreneurship internship is quite different from the traditional one and suggested a framework for the institution and organization to administer the program in employers' worksite. They mostly focused on the motivational, geographical, and physical environment issues in designing the program. Hence, Salem (2014) has suggested that the contents of an entrepreneurship internship could be developed by the universities in association with the industries.

Research Gap

The existing pieces of literature mostly addressed the necessity of an internship program in developing employability skills, and very few studies had been conducted on the significance of an internship for entrepreneurship development. Some authors like Heriot & Lahm (2009); Dobratz et al. (2014) proposed models to administer internship programs, but these models may be applicable in the developed country context where a culture of university-industry alliance exists deliberately. Though promoting such practice in Bangladeshi context is challenging due to traditional academic and corporate culture, it has paved an opportunity for research and necessitated intellectual nourishment to explore that area. This study may help to bridge the research gap by rationalizing the necessity of an entrepreneurship internship program and propose a self-reliant model for the universities to conduct such programs independently.

Methodology

This study is entirely qualitative, and necessary information was collected through a systematic literature review and interviewing different stakeholders of the internship programs. The first phase of the study tried to expose the role of an internship program at higher education by reviewing relevant research journals, periodicals, and by surfing entrepreneurship blogs available on websites between October 1, 2019, to November 1, 2019. Pertinent research work on the role of the industry and university in developing a pro entrepreneurship internship program is conceptualized in the context of different countries and industries. The literature review section has theoretically projected the problems of an employment-focused internship program and shown why entrepreneurship internship is necessary for contemporary time.

In the second phase of the research, three subsequent focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted with the undergraduate students who have just completed their internship program. They were asked specific questions such as the effectiveness of the internship program, the challenges of an intern, and the scope of entrepreneurship development through an internship. In the third phase of the study, fifteen bankers and fifteen executives were interviewed to acquire an insight into the traditional internship program conducted at corporate houses. All of the respondents were selected using judgmental sampling techniques. Respondents who have direct work experience as an internship supervisor were given preference. They were questioned on the issues like effectiveness of the internship program, attitude of the students in internship, the internship policy & program of the organization, challenges of an internship supervisor, and how far the internship program is facilitating entrepreneurship development.

At the final phase, an extensive face to face discussion session was conducted on the faculty internship supervisors of the department of Business Administration of Southern University Bangladesh to explore the extensive role of an internship program of a private university. The key matters of the discussion were - their role as an internship supervisor challenges to manage an intern, attitude

of an intern towards an internship, learning outcome, and opportunity to groom an undergraduate student with an entrepreneurial mindset through the internship program. The main purpose of conducting the FGDs and interviews was to discover the problems of existing internship programs and their contribution concerning entrepreneurship development. For data analysis, the common opinion of all the stakeholders was summarized and recorded on a paper.

Findings

Responses of Faculty Guide

The data depicts that the faculty guides of the internship are struggling with the timeframe of the program. According to most of the respondents, the time allocated for an internship is very insignificant, and it is very challenging to complete the internship report on time. This time factor is causing a series of problems throughout the internship programs. Firstly, students are in a rush to complete the report, and they adopt unfair means like copying from others' reports or putting fictitious data to finish it. In some host organizations, internship enrollment and admission procedure are delayed as it is lengthy and bureaucratic. In some cases, students cannot manage internship opportunities by themselves as the numbers of host organizations are very limited in comparison to the mounting number of graduating students. However, most of the interns are neither getting scope of internship according to their academic specialization (Major) nor in an appropriate organization and departments.

The uncooperative attitude of the host organizations towards interns is prevalent in the local companies. This factor is also marked by Yeasmin (2018) and Loretto (2019) in their writings. Most of the financial institutions are very reserved to share data for security and confidentiality issues. As a result, most of the internship reports do not address real problems since the topics are traditional, and the study area is a stereotype. Opportunity for innovation and knowledge development is seldom. According to the faculty members, learning outcomes of the internship programs do not give any result, and the opportunity for hands-on learning is very rare.

Consequently, the alignment between internship reports and learning of internship is somewhat

inconsistent and invalid. Sometimes, students are very negligent and irregular to maintain a meeting schedule with the faculty supervisor. Nearly all the faculty members' opinion was negative regarding the probability of learning entrepreneurship during the internship program.

Internship Supervisors

A negative stereotype about the interns and internship program was common among the internship supervisors. According to many of the respondents, students are escapist; remain absent; often irregular in submitting assignments and avoid physically demanding work. They lack basic technical skills to work in an office environment. They also agreed that organizations have a policy for an internship program, but for the official preoccupation, they cannot manage the schedule to supervise the interns effectively. Most of the bankers have opined that for maintaining official confidentiality and security compliance, they do not engage the interns in technical works. Their responses to the entrepreneurship issue were equivocal.

The Response of the Interns

Most of the interns were found pessimistic while sharing their experience of an internship program. Their responses echoed with the opinion of the faculty members. The equalized responses of two major stakeholders provide the testimony of the ineptness of the traditional internship program. The synergic responses are unavailability of the scope following the area of specialization, limited scope, non-cooperation of the host company, uncaring, reserve to share knowledge & data, and no opportunity to obtain technical knowledge. Most of the respondents shared that they were not allowed to perform functional assignments and placements are mostly clerical. Internship in multinational companies is tough, and the scope is biased due to nepotism. Some host organizations do not have any plans for the internship program and are reluctant to maintain the schedule. It is a less priority program for most of the organizations. They also reported that some faculty guides do not cooperate with them and they do not get motivation in this program as it is non-remunerative in most organizations. Most

importantly, there is no chance to learn either entrepreneurship or employability skills.

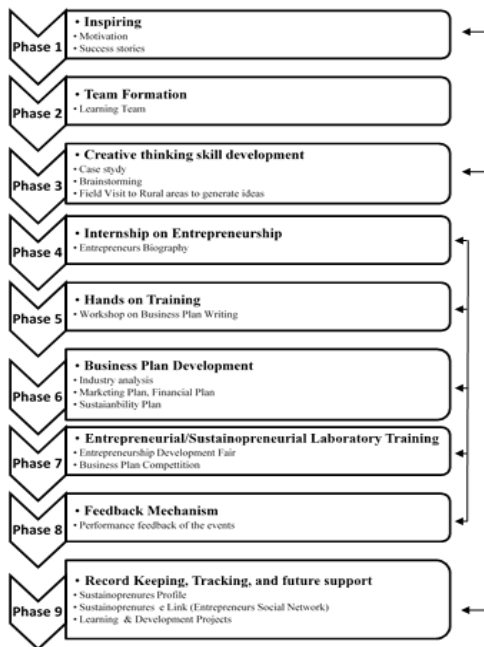
Discussions and Concluding Remarks

The findings of the study somewhat prove the ineffectiveness of the traditional internship program in attaining its objective and contributing to developing entrepreneurial skills among the students. All the stakeholders of this program are found pessimistic during the performance of the program, and several facts like limited scope, noncooperation of the host companies, and insufficient time are surfaced as the common hurdles to the successful internship program. Existing literature supports the importance of an internship that promotes entrepreneurship though it is a very daunting task to remodel the current practice of internship in our socioeconomic context.

As a challenging mission, the Department of Business Administration of SUB started an entrepreneurship development program back in the year 2005 as a pilot project. In the beginning, it was limited to some piecemeal coursework and was continued till 2010. Finally, in the year 2016, the current model (figure 1) presented in an International Conference on Sustainable Development, which was later approved as a Sustainopreneurship Education Model of SUB in the academic committee of the university.

The proposed model was published in the Journal of Innovation and Sustainability in the same year. The Nine phase sustainopreneurship education model (Figure 1) developed by Huda (2016), includes two internship opportunities, one is out-door, and another is on campus. Phase One of the model inspires the students, and phase Two helps them to work as a team. Phase Three develops the student's creative thinking skills through barnstorming workshops. A similar idea is shared by Collins, Hannon & Smith (2004) in their research work. The Fourth phase creates an opportunity to do an internship at a micro-enterprise or in startup firms. This outdoor activity is an entrepreneurial attachment with a micro-entrepreneur for fifteen days. Learners inhabit with the entrepreneur and observe his/her activities. This idea of entrepreneurship internship is also suggested by Ruch (2014), and The University of Toronto is practicing it as a "startup internship."

Figure 1: Sustainopreneurship Education Model



Source: Huda (2016)

Later, the intern develops a camera journal based on the experience and lessons learned from this internship and present it in a mini-workshop. All the participants of the workshop share their knowledge through an intensive fishbowl exercise. Most of the interns responded that they enjoyed the session and could connect it with their theoretical learning from the entrepreneurship development course. To take the program into new heights, top management of SUB has signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with some local Non-Government Development Organizations (NGDOs) engaged in Micro Finance and Socioeconomic development projects. In the future, the internship students will be engaged with the NGDOs for fifteen days to get real-time experience in the rural and sub-urban business. This residential internship is designed to facilitate the students to learn the challenges of doing business in village areas and develop ideas on rural entrepreneurship. A center for Innovation and Sustainopreneurship Development was formed to support the students in developing a start-up. The center will provide small office space, initial venture capital, and necessary support to form a small enterprise. However, an Entrepreneurship Lab is

developed for all the students of the university to test their innovations on the campus. They are allowed to sell their products among the students and staff of the university.

A spirit of social entrepreneurship could be nurtured among the students through this program, which may help them to be a Sustainopreneur. The university is also planning to arrange an overseas internship in collaboration with foreign universities. Such practice is also suggested by Salem (2014) in his research. During phase five, learners get an opportunity to attend a daylong training on business plan writing under an expert banker. At phase six, they develop a business plan keeping the issues of sustainable development in their mind. Finally, they get a live experience to develop a small business in a team and to sell their products at a business fair. They gain hands-on experience of being an entrepreneur, which helps them to set a mind of an entrepreneur or an intrapreneur. Such practice exists at North South University, Daffodil University, and the East Delta University of Bangladesh.

Implications and Potentials for Further Research

The findings of this research have surfaced some curtail issues of the traditional internship programs conducted at the private universities of Bangladesh and how they are impeding the creation of an entrepreneurial spirit of the graduates. However, the study tried to rationalize the necessity of entrepreneurship internship program as an alternative to the employment-focused academic curriculum. Southern University Bangladesh has started the momentum of exercising entrepreneurship through an internship model, but there is a scope for the scholars to develop it further towards excellence. As a corporate partner of the internship programs, the managers may use the findings of the study to overcome the hurdles of an internship program conducted at their premises. They may re-structure the program developing a pro-entrepreneurship rubric to aid the interns to develop an entrepreneurial mindset and help to nurture creativity among them. The outcome of this research may contribute to the existing body of knowledge, mainly in higher education management. It may support the academic institutions, government agencies, and other

stakeholders associated with higher education to develop entrepreneurship-focused social culture and academic curriculum.

Presently, the world is passing the most critical time of the history and battling against a very strong and deadly enemy, the COVID 19. The whole world is going through an unspeakable misery. The virus is not only causing severe health hazards to humanity but also paralyzing the global economic ecosystem. The world economy is under severe threat as it may disrupt business operations all around the globe. The post-corona economic downturn will create a huge unemployment problem throughout the world, which may damage the social ecosystem too. Hence, to revive the world business ecosystem, the universities, corporate houses, governments, and international development organizations must coalesce to repair the damages caused by the "Corona Catastrophe," elevating the higher education institutions to facilitate an entrepreneurial ecosystem for sustainable development of the world.

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