

An investigation of the effectiveness of work related learning: A case of the industrial attachment program offered by the faculty of commerce, University of Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Industrial attachment is a very important component in the learning system particularly for tertiary and higher education as it relates to those who are pursuing careers in commerce. This paper seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of the industrial attachment programme undertaken by the University of Zimbabwe, faculty of commerce. A questionnaire was used to obtain information to enable successful extraction of information from the intended sample. It was distributed to fourth year students to assess the effectiveness of the programme by obtaining perception of their attachment programme. The responses show that students were impressed by being attached as this enhanced their industrial/commercial exposure. Generally students liked the idea of being exposed to the practical world. Continuous evaluation and an assessment of courses covered prior to them being attached were highlighted as important in ensuring that the industrial attachment is really successful.

Work related learning at the University of Zimbabwe in various faculties varies depending on the emphasis on the programme. Issues raised in this paper will be beneficial to the other faculties at the university.

Keywords: industrial attachment, undergraduates, industrial liaison officer, host company, assessment, job training

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INTRODUCTION

It has been widely been accepted that Industrial attachment forms part of an important ingredient for learning in tertiary and higher education institutions in Zimbabwe. There is an ongoing emphasis on this by those in charge of these institutions. It has increasingly become an important element of training as employers continue to demand for fully trained students. Attachments are a platform for students to assimilate theory into practice. This is the whole essence of learning anyway, to apply the learned theories.

In Zimbabwe because of a growing number of universities producing graduates each year and dwindling employment opportunities employers have raised the stake by looking for those graduates who are self starters and who have gone through the working environment. There has been much concern on the quality of practical experience the students gain in the job market on their industrial attachment. Many employers who take students on attachment do not provide adequate on the job training as required by the university. Some end up doing menial jobs and never really do the essentials of the job. Some employers find cheap labour in these students. These important issues have prompted the authors to evaluate the industrial attachment programme as offered by the University Of Zimbabwe in the faculty of commerce and more specifically as it relates to the Bachelor of Accountancy students. The faculty requires that all students spend at least eight months (8) on industrial attachment as part fulfillment of the degree programmes. They are followed up by their lectures during this period to assess the students in terms of progress at the work environment. Also the work supervisors send quarterly assessments to the faculty.

It is mandatory for all undergraduates to go for industrial attachment in their third year for at least eight months during their four year degree programme. It is very necessary to evaluate this programme because since the programme started there has not been any scientific evaluation done on it. Although the programme is about eight years old it still has teething problems. There are still a number of issues to be attended to. There is therefore a need to get feedback from students on their perception of these industrial attachments. This paper interrogates from literature the importance of industrial attachment. The paper also provides relevant information on industrial attachment by the faculty of commerce, University of Zimbabwe. The current study follows from the engagement of literature. Relevant information is gathered. The study provides a firm foundation for assessing the effectiveness of the industrial attachment offered by the University Of Zimbabwe. It also provides a platform for suggestions for further improvement.

FACULTY OF COMMERCE INDUSTRIAL ATTACHMENT PROGRAMME

The faculty of commerce has three (3) departments offering undergraduate degree programmes which are the departments of accountancy, business studies and tourism leisure and hospitality. They offer four year degree programmes which are punctuated by industrial attachment in the third year, which invariably should take a minimum period of eight months. Generally, the students from these three departments have very good theoretical grounding. The current crop of students lack important practical skills and abilities that are much sought after by the industry. The university in seriously looking at these aspects has therefore introduced the industrial attachment programme to combat the lack of practical skills. Renganathan et al identified seven dimensions which are critical to the development of well polished up students.

These are technical know-how, communication and behavioural skills, analytical and critical thinking, practical aptitude, solution synthesis ability, lifetime learning capacity and entrepreneurial skills. Therefore the University of Zimbabwe places much emphasis on the practical skills hence the dedication of the whole academic year to industrial attachment. The other skills are embedded in the curricular.

The Faculty of commerce awards 120 credit units to industrial attachment out of the total 480 for the whole duration of the study. The industrial attachment is mandatory and is undertaken in the third year for at least eight-month period. A full time industrial liaison Officer is recruited to run the programme. One of the mandates of the officer is to ensure a flawless relationship between industry and the university. Because of the difficulty in getting places for attachments because of the decade long economic meltdown which has caused most industries to close down in Zimbabwe Students have to find companies of their choice. The companies range from very small one man owned businesses to big corporations listed on the Zimbabwe stock exchange. Of late students have gone regional to countries like South Africa. This is mainly because of limited job opportunities in the country. Because of the dwindling number of blue chip companies as a result of the decade long economic meltdown students should secure their own places of attachment as opposed to a situation where the industrial liaison officer facilitates placement of the students in various companies. The accountancy students prefer chartered accountancy firms and more specifically the big four which are KPMG, Ernst and Young, Deloitte and Touche and Price Waterhouse Coopers. It is only when they fail to get placements in these firms that they look elsewhere. The firms' uptake is very low and therefore a lot of the students do not get entry into the accounting firms. The department produces about 120 students on average each year. The industrial Liaison officer is instrumental in the selection of the best students who are taken aboard by the chartered accountants firms.

The main aim of the industrial attachment program is for students to be able to put into practice theories that would have been learnt during the first two years. They are also expected create useful contacts with captains of industry and for students to have a general feel of the industry. Therefore the programme was designed with these objectives in mind. The important aspects which are inculcated in the programme are hands-on practical training, project-based/report, special assignments and activities by the employer. Other skills that are expected to be imparted to the students during the attachment are leadership, communication and general business entrepreneurial skills. The industrial attachment evaluation takes these into account.

Because the University takes industrial attachment seriously the faculty has developed a set of assessment tools which invariably involve the lecturers and the host company. The employer gives an overall summary view of the student's performance. This is followed by an assessment by the lecturer and the students are also required to produce a final report on the activities covered.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

As a program under serious consideration in term of structure and practicability, it is important to study whether the programme is adding value to the whole learning process of the faculty. It is therefore important to get relevant feedback from the students involved. It is therefore the trust of this paper to review the feedback from the students concerning the faculty of commerce, department of accountancy attachment programme. The accountancy students have unique requirements and the accountancy programme is specialized and therefore requires

more technical assessments tools. It was therefore necessary to examine the feedback from students regarding the industrial attachment in respect of the following areas. These include experiences acquired on the attachment, the capacity in which the student was attached as and recommendations by the students which would capture the main perceptions of the student on the whole programme. The students' perceptions would assist the University of the Need to address the preparation of students for work experience.

There are a number of factors that affect the success of the industrial attachment programmes from the university and students' point of view. These include the evaluation methods employed, the relationship of the student with co workers and seniors of the host company and the perception of the host company towards industrial attachment as expressed by the support given.

This paper is set to focus on the feedback on the following areas;

- (1) The experiences the students got from the industrial attachment;
- (2) Feedback on the way the university runs the programme as articulated in the recommendations given by students.
- (3) The adequacy of the courses covered at the university before the industrial attachment programme.

Information was obtained through a questionnaire from the fourth year students who were still fresh from industrial attachment. The results of this study will be used to formulate a much robust industrial attachment programme with a solid framework. It would also assist other faculty who intends to introduce industrial attachment programmes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Four methods to building a learning capability were identified by Clements (2010) . These are;

- Making sure that students interact with industry activities during their period of study.
- Introducing new talent to organizations through industrial attachment programs.
- Offer on the job experience opportunities.
- Interact with the community
- Assist current employees to increase their skill level and knowledge base.
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Institutions of higher learning are always seeking for ways to ensure that students apply their acquired knowledge to practice, this way they learn by doing. (Clements, 2010). The university plays the major role in assessing the students. It goes out of its way in visiting students throughout the country wherever they are attached. There is therefore minimum interruption to the organizations involved. The organizations are highly involved in the selection of the students and in doing so they identify the skills needed from the student. A highly competitive selection process is done to select the best person for the programme. (Clements, 2010). Various studies have shown that there are a lot of benefits obtained from industrial attachment programs with much cooperation between the host organization and the institution involved. These include a belief in one's self and the ability to interact with others. (Gillin *et al.*, 1984; Wilson, 1974), acquisition of practical knowledge (Williams *et al.*, 1993), gaining of enough that would assist in getting employment (Clark, 1994; Sharma *et al.*, 1995). The arrangement for students to be put in various organizations for a learner ship program is an academic requirement for students to gain

relevant work experience so that students gain the necessary skills to augment their theoretical skills.(King, 1994).

If employers have prior knowledge of the student' expectations of their organizations they are better placed to assist the students for successful entry into the industry. (Waryzack Robert (1999). It is now well understood that training or education without practical skills are not sufficient for a person to effectively discharge his/her duties in any work environment. Schneider (1910) , Barbeau and stull(1990) stated that "there are aspects of every profession that cannot be learned in the classroom, but must be learned where the profession is practiced..."

Industrial attachments "for credit" are widely practiced and recognized by many universities. They are generally under the guidance of the university and specific grading system is employed to capture the performance in this area of study. A pass/fail decision is made depending on the performance. A lot of questions are raised for the "for credit" framework. These include issues to do with guidance by the academic institution, framework for awarding marks and more importantly whether there is sufficient ground to measure the academic performance based on the time that is spent on attachment. (Dodge *et al*, 2003). Green (1997) outlined that most companies do not employ students on attachment out of kindness but they find them as cheap labour or free labour. There is a lot of proof in literature that industrial attachments enhance students' skills. Nill(2003) rightfully puts it "...in the study of final year business studies students he found that 82 -97 percent of the group felt they had increased their skills on placement, particularly in the area of self confidence, time management, verbal communication and working on one's own initiative". Students on attachment should strive to acquire relevant market skills that are now essential. These are the ability to communicate, being able to properly manage time, to be able to believe in one's self and the ability to get on going on one's own (Gill and Lashine,2003;Dennis,1996). A number of students now join small companies which have little scope for graduate training. (connor, 2008)

Currently there are serious reservations on the skills acquired by graduates for institutions of higher education and the industries needs. There is a perceived mismatch. Haupt (2003) outlines that there is a gap of what the institutions of higher learning are producing and what the industry needs.

Industrial attachments programs are a marketing forum for various universities. The more students do well the more they market their respective universities and therefore ultimately the more reputable their universities become. The universities eventually are able to attract high caliber students. Tertiary and higher education institutions, particularly universities are responsible for the production of well grounded graduates who are highly qualified to meet industry expectation.

Joshua Ayakwa (2012) in one of his researches on student's placements indicated that development of their skills and exposure to the work environment is the main reasons for organizations to place students. They are also exposed to the responsibilities expected in their areas of interest. The same research also showed that some organizations take in trainees in order to beef up their workforce and to be able to identify potential employees from the students. According to career services(2004) students must develop core marketable skills for them to be able to compete favorably for available positions. These skills are communication, time management and belief in one's self. They are now very relevant for industry. Industrial attachment experiences are beneficial to students' since they enhance their theoretical training (Hughes and Moore, 1999).The experience increases self confidence and also provide an opportunity to link with professionals in their respective fields. (Van Dorp, 2008 p.23).

Accounting firms expose students to various companies and assignments, therefore those who join them acquire significant experience and skills. (Ford et al,1992).The attachment period exposes students to various working relationships with their seniors and peer workers and in the process they get to learn about the type of work that they are involved in. Learning in accounting is not just about accounting concepts and conventions. It is also not about realigning courses to the expectations of the accounting profession or the desire to conform to some other controlling body. (Watty, 2005; Doost, 1999). It is about the application of theory to practice. (Doost, 1999). Many organizations large and small have very high turnover on junior accountants. (Hilbeitel and Leaby, 2001).

METHODOLOGY

Questionnaires were used to collect information for this study. The participants were fourth year students who had a one year stint on attachment. A total of 130 questionnaires (to all fourth year students) were distributed and 103 were returned fully completed (representing 79.23 per cent). The purpose of the questionnaires was to determine the students' views of the industrial attachment. The questionnaires also included provisions where the students would put statements about their experiences which would be used to determine if the programme added any value to the students' education and also challenges students faced while on industrial attachment. For these questionnaires, the other elements examined were left as open ended.

After all the information was availed, the responses were subjected to SPSS software for critical analysis. Students' perception on attachment, challenges faced during attachment and general recommendations were captured and analysed. The recommendations would generally capture issues that the students would want to see improved on. Mostly it would touch on issues that they perceive to be irregular.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The aim of the paper was to obtain information on the students' perception on the industrial attachment programme. The questionnaire sought to establish whether in the students' opinion the industrial attachment added any value to their learning process. A yes or no answer was required and an elaboration if a yes answer is given.

Out of 103 respondents 3(2.91%) indicated that they were not happy of the industrial attachment. In terms of content their reasons for not being happy amounts to them doing only clerical duties and any other duties which were not core to their attachment.

One hundred of the 103 respondents were happy and their responses were in the affirmative "yes". The following were the main reasons for them agreeing that there was value to the industrial attachment. The percentage response is also indicated alongside.

- It helped to have an appreciation of the real world. (19%)
- They were able to apply theory to practice.(85.6%)
- It enhanced communication skills. (5%)
- It boosted confidence. (3%)

It is heartening to learn that most of the students indeed got value out of the industrial attachment. Most of them got excited by being able to marry theory to practice, about 85.6%.

The other important area was to find out if the courses that they had covered in their first and second year were relevant to the industrial attachment. Three answers were provided which are; relevant, not relevant, should have covered more. Students were also asked to indicate extra courses which could have been included if their answer is “should have covered more”. Sixty nine of the respondents (about 66.9%) indicated that more courses should have been covered. 34 indicated that the courses taught at that point were relevant and therefore adequate for them to proceed to industry. Of those that indicated that more courses should be covered gave the following as suggested courses. Alongside is also the frequency.

- Taxation (72)
- Professional values, ethics and attitudes. (31)
- Accounting packages (4)

Sixty nine percent of the respondents suggested that the tax course should be introduced in the second year. This is overwhelming and needs to be attended to. The students might have been subjected to tax assignments that they were unable to handle since the tax course is only done in the final year, after the attachment. It is not clear why students suggested that professional values, ethics and attitudes should also be done in the second year. More research should be done on this.

Another very important question raised in the questionnaire is whether a student would rejoin the organisation they were attached to. If a student is willing to rejoin the organisation it shows the student had a cordial working relationship with the host company. According to King (1994) a student also uses the attachment to gauge whether the student is prepared to work with the prospective employer.

Sixty one respondents were in the affirmative. They would go back to the firms they were attached to. Of that number 22(37.70%) of those who said “yes” were with Chartered accountants firms. All respondents who were with chartered accountants firms said they would go back if asked to. This also indicates that most students would prefer to be attached to Chartered accountants firms if given a chance to do so. 42 respondents indicated that they would not rejoin the organizations they were attached to. Of those who said they would not rejoin the organizations they were attached to they provided varying reasons. The following are the reasons proffered and the percentage of respondents in the negative.

- Poor remuneration (18%)
- Want to be at an accounting firm (20%)
- Small organisation, no room for growth (36.36%)

The questionnaire also asked the students to make recommendations to the University to improve the industrial attachment programme. The following were the responses that came from the students;

- Students require frequent communication with lecturers
- There should be proper and clear outline of the University’s expectation from the host organisation
- The university should seek attachment places on behalf of students.

Out of all the respondents 47.06% intimated that the university lectures should make much more assessment visits. Some have openly suggested that other local universities visit their students 3 or more times. Employers take more seriously those institutions who visit their students more. The lectures should take the visiting opportunities to clear any irregularities that may arise for students on attachment. The visits also help create more rapport between the university and industry.

Another 8.8% suggested that the university should seek placement for students. During these difficult times where jobs are not easy to come by students find it extremely difficult to secure industrial attachment places. They end up grabbing anything that comes their way. It is not surprising therefore to get such suggestions from students.

About 14.7% indicated that the university should clearly spell out expectations to host companies. This prevents a situation where students spent most of the attachment on irrelevant assignments.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the paper was to establish whether the industrial attachment programme offered by the University of Zimbabwe, faculty of commerce particularly the department of accountancy is effective. The approach taken by the researchers was to determine the students' perception of industrial attachment programme. The use of questionnaires was done to determine the adequacy of courses taken before attachment in the first and second year of study. Also attempts were made to establish the general feelings of students about the attachment and also the researcher sought to get more insight into the attachment by getting feedback through recommendations from students which was also part of the questionnaire. Since it is the first time for the students to be formally engaged with the industry, the students were expected to have a feel of what it is all about to be working. They are also expected to make meaningful and dynamic contributions to real industry life discussions back at the university. The attachment programme is also expected to make a high level contribution to university learning consistent with the rest of the curricula. The study is expected to provide useful information that would be used to continuously improve on the noble programme. Generally the findings indicate that the students really benefit from the industrial attachment programme particularly now with most employers looking for well qualified people. The overwhelming feedback (85.6%) on the application of theory to practice is an indicator that the main aims and objectives of the university in setting up the program are met. Also positive feedback on students appreciating the real working world also shows that the programme is indeed relevant.

The students also responded constructively indicating that a tax course should be taken before students proceed to industrial attachment. The University authorities should take seriously this suggestion as there was an overwhelming suggestion to that effect, 69.9%. The findings suggest that there should be a serious realignment of courses if students are going to benefit fully from the industrial attachment. A bridge tax course can be introduced to ensure that students have an idea before proceeding to attachment.

This study also revealed that the University should have regular visits to students on industrial attachments. At least three visits should be done for each student during the tenure of the industrial attachment. There is a need to re examine the programme with a view to address the issues that have been raised by students as hindering the smooth flow of the programme.

The feedback from students highlights the need to communicate formally with the host company clear expectations by the university from industry. In fact, attachment program are merely there for students to have a feel of the real life working environment. There is very limited time for students to really get practical working experience. Therefore a formally designed programme will ensure that students get value for the attachment. They will be able to learn a lot of things within the limited time available for attachment. It is made possible if the University communicates explicitly their expectation from industry, of course having consulted fully with industry.

Findings from this study also indicate that many of the department of accountancy students prefers to be attached with Chartered accountants firms. It is always the desire of students of accounts to be chartered accountants which is perceived to be the apex of the profession. There should be charted ways of establishing strong relationships with these companies so as to ensure a continuous intake by these companies.

The study is not exhaustive of industrial attachment issues. There are many aspects that can be explored, like the view of lectures on industrial attachment, the basis for awarding marks to students on industrial attachment, the perception of potential employers on the programme. A study can also be carried out to establish whether students who have gone through industrial attachment programs really show it when they come back to finish off their course. Are they wiser? The aim of future researches is to make the programme compact and to continuously improve on it. There is no going back on industrial attachment programmes since this is the in thing, mostly required for one to immediately contribute meaningfully on getting to industry. However what could hinder the success of the programme is the availability of places for students since the country has high unemployment rate because of many companies that have closed down during the hyper inflation period of 2000 to 2008. The university should also seriously look for ways and means of getting all the students requiring attachment attached.

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