

# INTERNSHIP PROGRAM: A BRIDGE TO CLOSE THE GAP BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Marziah Mokhtar<sup>1</sup> and Fauziana Fauzi @ Mat Rawi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Center of Foundation Studies, University Technology MARA, Dengkil Campus, 43800 Selangor, MALAYSIA

<sup>2</sup>Centre of Economics and Finance, Faculty of Business and Management, University Technology MARA, Puncak Alam Campus, 42300 Bandar Puncak Alam, Selangor, MALAYSIA

marzi742@uitm.edu.my<sup>1</sup>

fauziana@uitm.edu.my<sup>2</sup>

Received: 20 May 2019

Reviewed: 30 June 2019

Accepted: 30 August 2019

## Abstract

Higher Learning Institutions today are increasingly required to produce highly mobile graduates able to respond to the ever changing needs of the contemporary workplace. Through industrial training, interns will be exposed to ethical values and good working practices as well as to help them understand the safety practices and regulations inside the industry and to instill the spirit of teamwork and good relationship between interns and employees. The motivation for the current research study is to examine the implementation of industrial training conducted by Faculty of Business and Management of Universiti Teknologi MARA and industrial perception on Business Students during their practical period. This research is also prompted by the concern in the increasing number of unemployed among fresh graduates. Feedback from industries would give a better picture of what is required of students since employers are increasingly looking beyond a graduate's academic knowledge. Results show that interns are flexible towards task assigned, committed and resourceful towards work. However, their level of problem solving and analytical skills were low and they also lacked communication skills. It is anticipated that this exploratory study will enable the academia to bridge the gap between theory and practice thus improving the curricula towards developing successful professional business graduates.

**Keywords:** Industrial Training, Graduates unemployment, Soft Skills, Cognitive Development, Altitudinal values, Skills Development

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that the global youth unemployment rate is 13.1 per cent in 2016 and remains at that level through to 2017 (up from 12.9 per cent in 2015). The greater concern is the share and number of young people, often in emerging and developing countries, who live in extreme or moderate poverty despite having a job. The latest statistics of youth unemployment for developing countries show an increase from 7.4 million in 2015 to 7.7 million in 2016 and even projected to be higher for 2017 (7.9 million). Data from World Bank also supported the upward trend of youth unemployment as regards to the percentage of labour force (ages 15-24). The youth unemployment rate is the number of unemployed 15-24 year - youth expressed as a percentage of the youth labour force as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Youth Labour Force as % of total labour force

Years	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
% of total labour force	10.7	10.6	11.9	11.0	10.0	10.3	10.5	10.4	11.3	12.1

Source: World Bank, World Development Indicator

The survey by the Central Bank of Malaysia using 2015 data showed that when the national unemployment figure was at 3.1%, the unemployment rate among youths was about 10.7% – three times the national average. Unemployment among fresh graduates are on the rise and Bank Negara’s latest annual report has devoted a section to the unemployment among youths, touching on Malaysia’s position compared to other countries, and what the possible long-term implications are and measures that need to be taken. Other countries in the region are also facing the same predicament, where a large number of youths – those between the ages of 15 and 24 – are unemployed. The survey also reported that Thailand and Singapore also had a higher ratio of youth unemployment compared to their national averages at 4.4 times and 3.9 times, respectively.

Among the youths in the workforce, the percentage of those unemployed is higher among those with a tertiary education compared to the ones without a tertiary education (Bank Negara Survey, 2015). The finding of the survey revealed the most crucial reason was a mismatch between the training provided at universities and skill sets required by the employers. The employers stated that the current university curriculum does not reflect the current skill requirements. Notably, youth with tertiary education makes up a relatively larger share of unemployed youth (23% of total unemployed youth). Specifically, among those with tertiary educational attainment, the unemployment rate is higher at 15.3%.

A survey conducted by the World Bank and Talent Corporation found that 90% of companies believed that university graduates should have more industrial training by the time they graduated and 81% of companies surveyed rated communication skills as a major deficit among graduates. Industrial training refers to the work experience that is relevant to professional development prior to the graduation. In industrial training, students join the company which is relevant to their field of study and they will complete their training in a specified timeframe. Through industrial training, students get the opportunity to apply the theories they learn in classrooms. Hence, with a comprehensive industrial training and a supportive workplace environment and with the engagement from the industry partner, the problem of mismatched could be minimized and consequently the problem of the youth unemployment, especially among graduates can to be addressed quickly and effectively.

There are several skills that are needed in getting a job nowadays that have not been realized by the graduates. For examples, firms require working experience, level of education and English proficiency as skills that are very important for the graduates to get a job. Below are the pie charts showing the current employment requirements in Malaysia based on 70 job advertisements collected from <http://www.jobstreet.com.my/>.

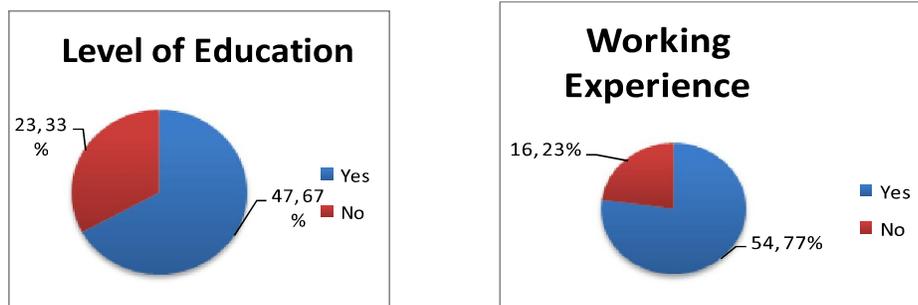


Figure 1: Percentage of Level of Education and Working Experience Demanded Among Companies

Figure 1 indicates the importance of working experience to the selected companies. It also shows the total of companies that required certain levels of education for the graduates to get a job. With a percentage of 67 percent, 47 companies required the candidates to have at least Bachelor's Degree in order to get a job. Only 33 percent of them did not require candidates to have at least Bachelor's Degree. The survey shows that 54 out of 70 companies are demanding working experience from the graduates in hiring a new worker. With a percentage of 77 percent, it shows that the demand on working experience from the graduates is high. Only 16 companies or 23 percent of them do not require graduates to have working experience.

Based on this issue highlighted, this paper aims to investigate and report skills deemed to be important or required by analyzing the practicum evaluation report that has been completed by the industry players. The feedback or comment on the performance of students from the industries will be useful information in the development of university programs as well as to equip students with critical skills by the time they graduated. The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Part 2 provides a literature review and part 3 and 4 will focus on the research objectives and method used in this paper. Part 5 will discuss the results and part 6 will conclude the study and provide some recommendations.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### *2.1 Youth Unemployment*

Omar and Rajoo (2016) reveals that among the factors contributing to unemployment is communication skill problem, lack of soft skill and working experience as well as graduates being choosy in getting jobs. This is supported by Modiyani et al. (2013) which found that majority of fresh graduates was not accepted in job market because the demand for experience was an important requirement. Job opportunities were also found to be very scarce because of over population, lack of resources, low wage and long hours of work.

Masturah et al. (2013) also found that the lack of communication skills such as speaking and communicating thought and ideas in English were deficiencies that could lead to negative outcomes of job interviews. The study also yielded better understanding of unemployed graduate's demographic characteristics in term of gender, types of Higher Education Institutions (HIE), fields of study and English competencies and their level of general communication skills at job interview. The same results revealed by Arumugam et al. (2014). A study on graduated nurses shows that there is a lack in communication skills and English language competency among the graduates that contribute to the problem.

On the other side, Mncayi (2016) demonstrated that more unemployed graduates disagree with the perceived causes of graduate unemployment which are lack of job searching skills, having no networks, lack of formal working experience, incompatibility between qualifications of graduate and the types of job available, age, being geographically separated from job hub, lack of confidence and inappropriate practices during recruitment. The most obvious finding emerged from the analysis is that there was no statistically significant association between work status and the causes of graduate unemployment. According to Hanapi and Nordin (2014) an effective skills training that will produce graduates who are skillful with good working ethics, proactive and able to solve problems related to work.

## 2.2 *Industrial Training*

Alexandra, et al. (2012) found that students' industrial training cannot be taken for granted because it has a great effect on their employability after graduation. According to the study, students need practical skills to secure jobs, however job competency can be acquired on the job. This point is supported by Shahril, et al. (2016). Internship training essentially improved trainee's soft skills and increased their workplace literacy and well-being. The study concluded that internship training is crucial, particularly among Arabic language and literature students as it enriches their experiences, knowledge and skills both in the personal and social life. Furthermore, research Yusof et al. (2013) indicated a satisfactory level of students' performance during the training. Most employers were willing to recruit the students in future. Technical skills were ranked as the most improvement needed by students.

According to Tanius (2015) who conducted most skills rated as excellent and good by industrial supervisor are: punctuality (65%), team work (60.9%), relation with colleagues (58.6%) and satisfaction with students' honesty, attitude, appearance and flexible/adaptable. However, there are some areas especially in knowledge and technical skills and soft skills organizations feel that students are still lacking as some of the students were rated as satisfactory and below average.

## 2.3 *Soft Skills*

Recently, there has been some negative feedback from the industries regarding the quality of graduates who lacked of soft skills. Graduates are required to be more market-oriented and possess interactive, personal and generic skills and not only academic qualifications. Graduates will be more attractive to employer if they have the ability to cope with uncertainty and work under pressure, have the communication and information technology skills and they are ready to learn and explore opportunities. There is no specific skill that is listed as "Soft" skills but the Malaysian Institute of Higher Learning interprets soft skills as incorporating aspects of generic skills which include non-academic skills such as leadership, teamwork, communication, and lifelong learning (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2006).

Research by Robles (2012) identified top 10 soft skills perceived as the most important by business executives; integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, team work and work ethics. The research also indicates that business executives consider interpersonal skills a very important attribute in job applications and most employers wanted honest employees who can communicate well, able to get along with others and also hard working. Andrews and Higson (2008) also found that business graduates need to be equipped with not only hard business- focused skills and competencies but also work experience and the ability to utilize softer business-related skills.

## 3.0 **METHODOLOGY**

This research utilizes the practicum evaluation report of the program of Bachelor of Business Economics, UiTM Selangor Puncak Alam Campus, starting from semester Jun 2014 until Jun 2017. The faculty will receive these reports sent by each company immediately at the end of the 4th month internship practicum training period. The questionnaire was distributed to the

companies comprising public and private sectors for the purpose of evaluation during the internship program. The questionnaire was divided into three major sections which begin with the Section A that collects the demographic information backgrounds regarding the gender of the interns, types and location of companies (within Selangor and outside Selangor). Section B measures the performance and industrial training development that constitutes the cognitive development, skill development and personal development. The questionnaire was designed using a Likert scale of 5-point with 1= *unsatisfactory* to 5= *excellent*. The last section which is Section C provides the avenue for the industry to give feedback that consists of comments and suggestions from the companies as an open-ended statement.

Demographic information was analyzed using descriptive analysis and results were presented in bar chart format. The statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) software was used to analyze both Part A and B. As for Part C, results were presented using thematic table. Data of Part B were analyzed by comparing the means between the elements of cognitive development, skill development and attitudinal values. The highest mean represents the best factor that affects performance of the trainee. The second analysis of Part B was made by comparing the means among the interns based on gender, state and company using independent sample t-test in order to find out if there is a mean difference with regard to gender, state and type of company.

#### 4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results are reported in three main categories; firstly, the demographic background according to gender, place of internship and types of companies, secondly, interns’ performance and industrial training development and lastly, the feedback in terms of comments and suggestions from the open ended questions filled up by companies.

##### *Demographic Profile*

Table 2: Demographic Profile

		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	53	26.5
	Female	147	73.5
Type of company	Public	66	33
	Private	134	67
Placement of internship	Selangor	107	53.5
	Outside Selangor	93	46.5

The respondents involved in the study were 53 males (26.5 %) and 147 females (73.5%) as shown in Table 2. The respondent were sent to companies within Selangor and outside (Johor, Pahang, Melacca and Kelantan). The number of interns who went for their internship program in Selangor were 107 interns (53.5%) and the rest were 93 interns (46.5 %) outside Selangor. A total of 66 public companies (33%) and 134 private companies (67%) involved in this study.

### Descriptive Analysis

Table 3 below, illustrates the importance of elements than has been evaluated by companies by ranking them as 1 being the most important element to the 14<sup>th</sup> being the least important. The result shows that flexibility towards task was assigned top of the list followed by potential to excel in the future and willingness to accept feedback for improvement. This shows that the industries noticed that the interns possessed good attitude and flexibility in doing tasks or assignment given during practical training session. The result also indicates that the level of problem solving skills or analytical skills and knowledge application and creative thinking abilities were ranked as the last two important elements during the internship program.

Table 3: Descriptive Analysis on the Trainee's Performance Evaluated by Industries

Generic Skills	Rank	Mean	Std. Deviation
Knowledge acquisition in doing tasks/assignments	9	4.30	.634
Learning capabilities in new tasks/jobs	6	4.41	.620
Self-directed learner	10	4.27	.742
Knowledge application and creative thinking abilities	13	4.18	.707
Level of tasks management skills	10	4.27	.691
Level of problem solving/analytical skills	14	4.09	.674
Communication and language proficiency skills	11	4.25	.714
Social and human interrelation skills	7	4.39	.728
Computer and system (ICT)skills	8	4.32	.699
Motivational level of trainee	4	4.48	.642
Flexibility towards tasks assignments	1	4.54	.584
Time management/willingness to work extra time	6	4.41	.724
Accountability and responsibility to tasks. (adherence to work standards, meet datelines, sense of urgency)	5	4.43	.684
Quality of work and creativity	10	4.27	.655
Leadership qualities (ability to work with people, in team)	12	4.17	.724
Willing to accept feedback/improvement	3	4.52	.609
Overall trainee's performance (attendance, productivity/contribution to organization)	5	4.43	.645
Potential to excel in future	2	4.53	.601

The mean results for descriptive analysis on the trainee's performance evaluated by industries are between 4.45 and 4.09. Two generic skills were ranked as of same importance were accountability and responsibility to task and overall trainee's performance (ranked as fifth). The level of task management skills and self-directed learner skills were also considered of the same level of importance and were ranked 10<sup>th</sup>.

### Comparing means using Independent Sample T-test

This section of the study used the independent sample t-test to calculate the sub group means (cognitive development, skills development and attitudinal values) and compared the data on gender, type of companies and area of placement. It was found that only elements of cognitive development and attitudinal elements were significant where trainees were placed for the practicum program. This indicates that the choice of company is important and has impact on the cognitive development and attitude outcome. This is illustrated in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Comparing means using Independent Sample T-test

Gender			
Elements	P-Value	Mean Difference	Conclusions
Cognitive development	0.339	-0.06382	Not significant
Skills Development	0.555	-0.11489	Not significant
Attitudinal Values	0.227	-0.15069	Not significant
State			
Cognitive Development	0.406	.06974	Not significant
Skills Development	0.868	-.00470	Not significant
Attitudinal Values	0.319	-.01188	Not significant
Companies			
Cognitive Development	0.032	0.18905	Significant
Skills Development	0.128	0.22858	Not significant
Attitudinal Values	0.013	0.21569	Significant

*Open ended coments and suggestion for improvement*

The answers for the open-ended question given by the companies were categorised into several themes. Table 5 listed all the responses from companies on strengths of the trainee. There are twelve main themes listed and most comments were listed under commitment towards work followed by trainee being resourceful. These positive comment or the strength of the trainees must be polished and taken into account so that the chances for employability would be higher after graduation.

Table 5: Open-ended responses from companies on strengths of trainees

Main Theme	Comment on Strengths of Trainee	
1) Team Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Fast learner.</li> <li>*Willing to assist others in terms of any urgent matters.</li> <li>* Able to cooperate and adapt easily.</li> <li>* Positive attitude and positive appearance to the team.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Flair to work with others in the team.</li> <li>* Good networking skills with other staff.</li> <li>* Able to share ideas and techniques on collecting information.</li> <li>* Able to work in harmony with others.</li> </ul>
2) Resourceful (Lifelong learning and information management skills )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Hard working and able to handle any Tasks.</li> <li>*Willing to learn new knowledge &amp; has has the ability to adapt with company’s request.</li> <li>* Able to perform multi tasks.</li> <li>* Have skills in managing tasks given.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Proactive.</li> <li>* Able to hande various operational Issues.</li> <li>* Systematic mannerof work.</li> <li>* Excel at planning.</li> </ul>
3) Communication skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Great communication/ interaction skill with others.</li> <li>* Very clear in giving information.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Good communication with team mates.</li> <li>* Good command of English and able to speak fluently.</li> </ul>
4) Enthusiastic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Trainee demonstrated willingness to accept the tasks and job given.</li> <li>* Teachable and willing to learn.</li> <li>* Eager to learn and try new things.</li> <li>* Strong initiative to learn.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Motivated to work.</li> <li>* Keen in learning new knowledge.</li> <li>* Quick in grasping new Knowledge.</li> </ul>
5) Commitment towards work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Strong commitment towards work.</li> <li>* Focus and not easily distracted by the Environment.</li> <li>* Flexible and willing to accepfeedback.</li> <li>*Responsible and willing to give full commitment under pressure.</li> <li>*Dedicated and hardworking.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Volunteer to do other tasks than given ones.</li> <li>* Willing to work extra time.</li> <li>* Meticulous when doing work and produce high quality results.</li> <li>* Willing to work extra mile and learn from mistakes.</li> </ul>

Main Theme	Comment on Strengths of Trainee	
	* Able to produce results. * Willing to learn and seek new Knowledge.	* Can work under pressure. * Never give up in completing difficult task.
6) Ethics and professional moral	* Right attitude towards job/task. * Efficient with integrity. * Reliable, responsible and able to meet date lines.	* Honest employee. * Able to accept negative feedback from magement.
7) Discipline	* Hard work and very discipline when it comes to work. *Willing to learn and always be Positive.	* Punctuality at work and submission of task.
8) Independent	*Can do assigned job with minimal supervision.	* Able to complete task with minor Guidance.
10) Appearance/Personality	* Pleasant personality. * Well groomed. * Good interpersonal skills. * Easy going. * Good self confidence.	*Helpful. *Responsible. *Accountable. * Strong interpersonal skills. * Energetic.
11) Critical thinking and problem solving skills	* Ask the right question to the right person.	* Good at giving new ideas.
12) Entrepreneurship	* Willing to learn every aspect of business skills.	

Table 6 shows the area of improvements that were suggested by the companies. There are eight main themes suggested for improvement. These opened comments were consistent with the earlier results which emphasized on critical thinking and creativity as being the most needed skills to be nurtured. The next most critical feedback was regarding the communication skills of the trainees. This is a very crucial aspect that needs to be enhanced since lack of the ability to communicate well will be an impediment during work interviews that will create a problem in executing the job later.

Table 6: Areas of improvements

Main Theme	Comments on areas of improvements.	
1) Critical Thinking/Creativity	* Should focus on critical thinking and problem solving. * Must be more creative and Independent. * Need to show own initiative at Work.	* Analytical thinking. * Able to suggest new ideas to the Management. * Creative in performing job that was given.
2) Communication Skills	* Need to improve on effective Communication. * Need better communicational skills in English. * Need to have skillll in business Communication.	* Improve communication in marketing skills. * Need public relation skills.
3) Work Management	* Should work faster to improve time management. * Need to be more aggressive. * Need to improve on ability to make decisions regarding work.	* Show enthusiasm in work. * Be more determined. * Be more responsive towards immediate superior instructions.
4) Self- improvement	* Have to be more confident. * To improve on the presentation Skill. * Must be multi tasking individual.	* Must ask questions if do not understand the instructions. * Be more adaptive to the working Environment.

Main Theme	Comments on areas of improvements.	
	* Must be friendly.	* To socialize more with office Mates.
5) Discipline	* Punctuality	* No last minute jobs.
6) Leadership	* Must show leadership skills.	
7) ICT skill/Writing skills	* Must be familiar with the Excell Software.	* Must improve writing skills.
8) Social skills	* Must improve social skills.	* Be an extrovert.

Based on the Table 6, the trainees are advised to have more critical thinking and creative in doing their task. They should be able to do the job independently and need to show their own initiative at work. Communication aspect is also very importance. They should have an effective communication, better communication skills in English and also skills in business communication. Other area of improvements should be in work management, self – improvement, discipline, leadership, ICT skill/writing skill and also in social skills.

**5.0 CONCLUSION**

This paper explores feedback from the industry on an internship program conducted for the Bachelor of Economics students of UiTM. It is expected that the study will enable the academics to investigate and miss match between theory and practice. The internship program could be enhanced further by the Faculty of Business and Management, UiTM by using the results and feedback from the companies where the internship program is conducted.

The result shows that flexibility towards task was assigned top of the list followed by potential to excel in the future and willingness to accept feedback for improvement. This shows that the industries noticed that the interns possessed good attitude and flexibility in doing tasks or assignment given during practical training session. The result also indicates that the level of problem solving skills or analytical skills and knowledge application and creative thinking abilities were ranked as the last two important elements during the internship program. This result is supported by Robles (2012) who identified top 10 soft skills perceived as the most important by business executives; integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, team work and work ethics.

Besides that, the choice of company also important and has impact on the cognitive development and attitude outcome. Among the strengths of the trainees acknowledge by the company are the ability of the trainees to demonstrate a good team work, resourcefulness and also have a good communication skill. These results are aligned with research by Tanius (2015). The results showed that the most skills rated as excellent and good by industrial supervisor are: punctuality (65%), team work (60.9%), relation with colleagues (58.6%) and satisfaction with students’ honesty, attitude, appearance and flexible/adaptable.

For the area of improvement, trainees are advised to be more creative and having a high level of critical thinking besides communication skills and work management. This is supported by Masturah et al. (2013) who also found that the lack of communication skills such as speaking and communicating thought and ideas in English were deficiencies that could lead to negative outcomes of job interviews. For the recommendation, other research on the internship program should also be conducted by other departments from the Faculty of Business and Management.

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