

The effectiveness of internship practice for English language majors

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the internship practice of English-majored students at Hong Bang International University during the academic years 2019 - 2020 and explores the effectiveness of internships, based on the perspectives of all stakeholders: the employers, the lecturers, and the interns. The article employs both qualitative and quantitative data from the survey questionnaires and interviews with 83 students, 67 employers, and 7 lecturers. The findings show that internship provides the interns a practical environment to develop essential skills and competencies ready for their future work. Based on the findings of the study, the authors make suggestions on the course design and the training of essential skills and competencies for English majored students with Commerce - Media specialization, in particular.

Key words: *internship, skill development, employability skills, English language major*

1. INTRODUCTION

Internships are considered an indispensable part of higher education, a bridge between the university and the world of work [1]. In today's fast-changing world, internships create opportunities for students to learn in a real-world environment, with quick access to changes in their chosen career fields. These opportunities are sometimes not available to students on campus due to the university's shortage of resources to keep up with changes in the society and the labor market.

Although internships are significant in most college and university education programs in other countries around the world, many faculties in Vietnamese higher educational institutions do not require internships, especially those in social and humanities disciplines. The disciplines that have traditionally focused on practice and internships include pedagogy, engineering, technology, medicine, tourism, journalism, media, finance, banking, and business administration. Out of the 10 established faculties that offer the BA programs in English language in Ho Chi Minh city,

6 faculties include internships in their curriculum and only 3 faculties emphasize the internship requirements and expected outputs in their publicized websites. Internships are normally considered as the last stage of the educational process and a mandatory condition for graduation. Therefore, internship is often associated with the phrase "graduate internship" (thực tập tốt nghiệp).

Currently, there are not many studies on the effects and effectiveness of internships in Vietnam's higher education. There are not many studies on the role of internship in the curriculum leading to the Bachelor's degree in English language. In this article, the effectiveness of the internship is defined as the extent of knowledge and skills acquired during the internship experience in comparison to the output standards of the curriculum.

Most of the publications on internships so far are seminar presentations based on lecturers' observation and teaching experience rather than on field research. The author Bui Nhat

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Vuong states that most of the students' internship activities were only formalistic and did not meet any standards, meaning that the quality of training was not very high. It is, therefore, necessary to increase cooperation in developing human resources between enterprises and universities [2]. Similarly, Nguyen Thi Thanh Nga and Thai Thi Thu Trang comment that the Vietnamese labor market faces many shortcomings as many graduates cannot find jobs on graduation. It is because that their professional qualifications and skills do not meet the job demands. These authors suggest that internships should be enhanced in terms of contents and operation, and the interns should be more active in the internship process [3].

This article is based on the 3 following research questions:

1. How was the Professional Internship module in the Commerce-Media specialization at Hong Bang International University conducted?
2. To what extent do the outcomes of the internship experience meet the program learning outcomes of the BA English language curriculum with Commerce-Media specialization?
3. What measures should be taken to improve the effectiveness of professional internship?

2. OVERVIEW ON INTERNSHIPS

2.1. The significance of internships in higher education

According to John Dewy, experience is an important part of the educational process [4]. An internship is a form of experiential learning that helps students get access to the working environment, improve their knowledge of the profession, and understand the requirements of real work. Maertz et al also emphasized that internship experience is the transition from classroom experience to practical experience in life, helping students connect knowledge and practice [5]. Some other researchers have also shown that the internship helps students to link their interest, their choice of study program, and career prospects in the future [6].

For students, internships provide opportunities for them to learn new knowledge related to the profession and to develop core skills for future jobs such as management skills, communication skills, and self-management skills [7]. As such, the internship process is essentially an off-campus learning process.

For the university, internship helps ensuring the quality of education and defining the output standards of the education in accordance with changing demands of the industry. Internship activities also reflect the practicality of the educational programs. In addition, internship activities also demonstrate the university's ability to cooperate and connect with the outside community and society, keeping lecturers updated with the trends and demands of the economy and the labor market.

For enterprises and host organizations, the connection with training institutions might bring in several long-term benefits because universities are also a potential human resource supply and a source of potential customers. According to Ismail, for business sectors which are facing the shortage of labor, interns can even provide cheap labor and timely human resources [8].

In this article, the terms of enterprise, industry, corporate, and host organizations are used alternatively to refer to the workplace where the students experience their internships.

2.2. Forms of internships

Although all internships are commonly conducted in the workplace, there are many forms of internships nowadays based on the characteristics of internships and the relationships among students, universities, and enterprises.

Firstly, internships can be divided into two categories, paid internships, and unpaid internships. For the paid internship, the intern needs to attend the employer's selection and sign a contract for a specific employment period. This is a good opportunity for students to learn

and develop both career knowledge and skills to work in a real business environment.

Secondly, based on the application and reception of interns, there are two types of interns: individual and group. Due to the nature of the work and the characteristics of the workplace, some host institutions require the university to organize intern groups. The pedagogy, nursing, medicine, finance, and banking normally have this requirement for the university and the intern. Students in humanities and social sciences such as English language, journalism, media, business administration etc. normally can apply for internship posts as individuals [1-2].

In addition, internships have varying lengths of time, which can last from 2 months to 1 year, taken possibly either full-time or part-time. Internships can also be organized domestically or internationally.

2.3. The significance of internship in the BA English Language curriculum

The output standards of the Bachelor's degree in English Language at Hong Bang International University in 2018 clearly expect that the graduates acquire in-depth knowledge of English- American language and culture, and professional skills which are suitable for working effectively in the fields of English teaching, translation and interpretation, media, business management, restaurants, hotels, diplomatic agencies, etc. The graduates are also expected to have abilities to handle jobs in the professional workplace and study at higher levels.

Students specializing in Commerce - Media have the following specific expectations on knowledge, skills, and attitudes:

(1) Knowledge outcomes

- Mastering and applying basic knowledge about cultural, social life, living environment, and working environment.

- Having systematic knowledge of English theory, culture, and literature of English-using countries such as the UK and US to apply in communication and administration situations at work.
- Grasping the requirements of work in the workplace, business environment, and apply the knowledge learned into real-life work.

(2) Skill outcomes

- Having the ability to use English effectively in everyday life and in an office environment in which English is used.
- Having the capacity and skills to perform administrative and managerial tasks in companies and enterprises.
- Having the ability and skills to organize public events.
- Having ability to interact with the public.
- Having skills in applying information technology at work.

2.4. The objectives and requirements of the Professional Internship module

The objectives, contents, and form of the internship period are described in detail in the module outline coded 02445. Students will practice at businesses and organizations in the fields of manufacturing, services, tourism, hotels, training, diplomacy, media, etc. for the purpose of learning about the actual working environment and developing basic knowledge and skills for future work. Students' internship experience is presented in a report following the Guidelines for Writing Internship Report compiled by the Department of English Language.

In terms of knowledge, the Professional Internship module states that after completing the relevant courses in Business English, students approach the working environment in enterprises for professional practice to equip with practical knowledge, compare the theory with work practice; master the knowledge required for practical work; and gain more

understanding of the trade and service sectors.

In terms of skills, the Professional Internship module emphasizes that students know how to apply the knowledge learned and develop several skills such as communication skills, teamwork skills, problem solving skills, time management skills, office correspondence skills, translation skills, and independent working skills.

In terms of attitudes, the module requires students to understand and observe the regulations and requirements at the workplace. In addition, it requires the interns to develop independent working attitude and strictly abide by the direction of the instructors and managers at the host organizations.

As described in the above sections, the Professional Internship module is mandatory and essential to help students develop their core knowledge and skills. This module is normally arranged in the final year. Until the 2018 academic year, the Professional Internship module includes 2 credit hours. This shows that internships have not received sufficient attention and interests from program designers.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND RESULTS

3.1. Research site

The study was conducted from June 2019 to December 2020 at the Department of English Language of Hong Bang International University. The Department has a total of 305 students and 16 faculty members. The curriculum of the English language major consists of 4 components: (1) general education knowledge; (2) English knowledge and skills; (3) core knowledge such as linguistics, cultures, and literature; (4) specialized knowledge and skills (specialization courses) oriented to 3 areas including English Language Teaching, Interpretation, and Commerce - Media. For language skills, the output of English proficiency is equivalent to IELTS 6.5 and above or C1 level according to the Common European Framework

of Reference (CEFR).

In the seventh semester of the study program, which is the first semester of the fourth year of a 4-year program, students are informed by their academic advisor about the purpose and requirements of the Professional Internship module. During the eighth semester or the last semester, students begin to take on the internship experience. The number of students participating in this research project includes all 83 students majoring in Commerce - Media who started their internships from June 2019.

The research team evaluate the effectiveness of the internship by comparing the knowledge and skills that students gain from their internship experience to the outcome standards of the curriculum and the Professional Internship module. In other words, the effectiveness of the internship is based on the development of students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes [9].

3.2. Research design

This study uses a method of data collection that combines qualitative and quantitative data from the following sources:

- (1) The survey questionnaires with 67 employers, aiming to get the employers' assessment on the interns' competency.
- (2) The evaluation forms on the interns' performance graded by the on-site supervisors.
- (3) The survey questionnaires conducted with 83 interns focusing on the perspectives of the interns on skill and knowledge development.
- (4) The interviews with 15 students who were randomly selected. The interviews focus on the impact of internship experience on career choices and the interns' recommendations for the improvement of internships.
- (5) The interviews with 7 lecturers who directly teach and guide students in the relevant courses in the Commerce - Media specialization. These interviews aim to find out the lecturers' eva-

uation on the students' skills and knowledge, and their suggestions to improve the effectiveness of internship.

The results of data analysis from the above sources are summarized and presented in the next sections of the article.

3.3. Research Findings

3.3.1. Forms of internships

Of the 83 interns, 76 (91%) students found internship positions by themselves. The Department assisted the remaining 7 students to find a suitable workplace. 67 students (80%) have taken part in unpaid internships. 16 students (20%) received a subsidy equivalent to lunch and transportation expenses. Among the 15 students who participated in the interview, there were 6 students having difficulty in finding internships by themselves. The main

reason is that these students or their families do not have close relationships with any business units and do not have sufficient time to search for internship jobs. 9 students do not have difficulty in finding a post because they previously worked part-time during their studies or their family and relatives have their own business. The business areas where English language students do their internship are wide and diverse. However, according to interviewed respondents, the preparation time of 3 months spent to contact the host organizations and apply for an internship is not favorable for students to find paid internships or desired positions.

3.3.2. Business areas for internships

The business areas of the host organizations are quite diverse, which are summarized in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Business areas of host organizations

Business areas	Numbers of interns	Percentage
English training	19	22
Estate and Property	15	18
Trade and service	14	16
Media	13	15
Tourism	12	14
Logistics	7	8.3
Fashion	3	3.6

Table 1 shows that English language training has the highest number of interns. Students hold positions including office staffs, enrollment clerks, academic advisors, administrative staff, and academic staff at some established English language centers in Ho Chi Minh city. The real estate profession also accepts many interns in the positions of client records management, client consultant, office clerk, administrative staff, and document translator. This data shows that students seek internships in professions in high demand of the current socio-economy rather than occupations associated with English

use. The positions which are favorable among the interns are office staff, customer service, document translator, and assistant to manager.

3.3.3. Evaluation on internships by the host organizations

Students are assessed on the level of task completion, the level of contribution to the daily operations of the company, working capacity, discipline, working attitude, ability to communicate with colleagues. **Table 2** summarizes the results given by the instructors at the workplace.

Table 2. *Internship evaluation by the host organizations*

Criteria	Rating	Number of interns	Percentage
Task completion	Outstanding	29	34
	Very good	49	59
	Good	5	6
	Average	0	
Contribution to daily operation	Much	82	98.7
	Moderate	1	1.3
	None	0	
Professional ability	Very good	49	59
	Good	32	38
	Average	1	1.3
	Poor	0	
Discipline	Very good	83	100
	Good	0	
Working attitude	Positive	82	98.7
	Moderate	1	1.3
	Passive	0	
Communication ability	Good	82	98.7
	Average	1	1.3
	Low	0	
Possibility to be recruited on graduation	Agreed	36	43.3

As commented by the interns' supervisors, the strengths of the students include high discipline, professional ability, communicative ability, dynamism, creativity, and active learning attitude. Over 90% of the students are highly appreciated for these strengths. In terms of professional capacity, over 98% of students are rated as very good and good by the enterprises, meaning that the students effectively meet the demands of the workplace. In addition, 43% of students are rated by the host organizations as having high professional qualifications, suitable to be recruited to the company on graduation. Thus, compared to the output standards of the curriculum, the students have reached the expectations of the study programs.

3.3.4. Results of internships evaluated by the interns

According to the results of the survey, the core skills being developed throughout the specialization courses and the internship experiences include communication skills, interpreting skills, critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork, adaptive skills, office skills, correspondence skills, and independently working skills. The three skill areas which are not adequately improved from the internship are event organization skills, negotiation skills, and public presentation skills. This is a group of skills that require a formal and experienced job position. Therefore, the interns have little opportunity to practice and develop these skills. **Table 3** describes the percentage of the interns by each degree of skill formation according to the interns' self-assessment.

Table 3. Skill development in internships

Skills	High	Moderate	Low	None
Communicative skills	51.9	37	11.1	0
Problem solving	44.4	51.9	3.7	0
Critical thinking	48.1	40.7	11.1	0
Translation, interpretation	48.1	37	11.1	3.7
Teamwork	40.7	51.9	7.4	0
Correspondence skills	37	51.9	7.4	3.7
Public speaking	25.9	44.4	18.5	11.1
Event organizing skills	18.5	40.7	25.9	14.8
Self-assessment	22.2	63	11.1	3.7
Negotiation	18.5	44.4	29.6	7.4

Above is a group of skills identified in the output standards of the study program and in the objectives of the Professional Internship module. The findings show that the internship period created the opportunity for the students to improve and develop these professional skills.

In addition to skill development, students also gained specific knowledge in corporate cultures, corporate performance, corporate

history, corporate mission - vision - values, and the socio-economic context relevant to its operations. **Table 4** describes the percentage of interns by attainment levels by each domain of knowledge. The results showed that the percentage of students who had low levels of understanding about the business characteristics was from 17.9% to 39.2%. These indicators certainly need further improvement.

Table 4. Knowledge development in internship

Knowledge about Enterprises	High	Moderate	Low	None
Core values	53.6	21.4	17.9	7.1
Enterprise operation	46.4	32.1	14.3	7.1
Mission, vision	46.4	28.6	14.3	10.7
Enterprise cultures	35.7	46.4	14.3	3.6
Enterprise history	25	35.7	32.1	7.1

The findings from the interviews with 15 students show that knowledge and skills gained from the specialization courses effectively help the students in the internship process. These modules have prepared the students for having an understanding of the business operations and corporate cultures.

These courses also familiarize students to a few skills such as word processing, office skills, translation and communication skills. Internship experience motivates the students to improve more skills and knowledge for their future jobs. 100% of these students want to find a job in business sectors after graduation.

In other words, all 15 interviewed respondents are willing to work in any types of business fields. This shows that job opportunities for English language majored students are quite flexible and diverse.

3.3.5. The integration of internship in the curriculum

The interviews with the lecturers in charge of specialized modules showed that all 7 lecturers designed their course outlines based on their own experience and expertise. The lecturers do not refer to the output standards of the study program. The lecturers do not have sufficient information about the internship modules nor participate in evaluating the results of the internships. This shows that the Internship module is separated from and not closely linked to specialized courses. Specifically, there are no guidance and participation of the faculties in organizing and evaluating the student's internship. In effect, the students usually contact their academic advisor or the faculty secretary whenever they need to discuss issues related to the writing of the internship reports. For issues relating to the professional knowledge and skills, the students normally exchange ideas with friends without consulting their lecturers.

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The findings of the research indicate that the Professional Internship module plays an important role in the Bachelor's degree program of English Language with Commerce-Media specialization. Internship experience has helped students develop essential skills such as problem solving, communication skills, thinking skills, teamwork skills, independent working skills, and translation skills. In terms of knowledge, students develop the understanding of the socio-

economic context, corporate operation, corporate values, and corporate vision. The research results also show that the host organizations appreciate the working competency of the students, which meet the demands of the work requirements. In brief, the internship module is highly effective, meeting the output standards of the study program.

To enhance the quality and effectiveness of the Professional Internship module, the research team proposes the following measures based on the research findings:

1. The announcement and instruction of the internship should be held at the end of Term 5, giving students enough time to search for internship opportunities.
2. The Professional Internship module should be regarded as a learning process, so it is necessary to have a lead instructor in charge. The lecturers of specialization courses should participate in the instruction and assessment of internship.
3. The number of credit hours of the Professional Internship module need to be increased from 2 to 6 credit hours. The objectives of the module should specify the group of knowledge and skills that students need to acquire, based on the group of knowledge and skills mentioned above.
4. There should be a solid connection between the specialization courses and the internship module. Specifically, the output standard of the training program should define the group of skills and knowledge as suggested by this article.

In summary, this article has contributed a specific review on the actual organization of internship activities and proposed measures to improve the effectiveness of the internship module in the Bachelor's degree program in

English Language with Commerce-Media specialization at Hong Bang International University. Research studies on the effectiveness of experiential learning in general and internship activities, in particular, still face many challenges in terms of approaches and assessment tools. Therefore, the research team recommends that more studies on internship effectiveness will be conducted in other disciplines to constantly improve the quality of education of the institution as a whole.

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Nâng cao hiệu quả thực tập chuyên môn trong chương trình đào tạo Cử nhân Ngôn ngữ Anh

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TÓM TẮT

Bài viết này nghiên cứu việc tổ chức thực tập cho sinh viên chuyên ngữ Anh tại Trường Đại học Quốc tế Hồng Bàng trong niên khóa 2019 - 2020 và phân tích hiệu quả của thực tập qua đánh giá của nhà tuyển dụng, giảng viên, và sinh viên thực tập. Dữ liệu sử dụng trong bài viết dựa trên khảo sát và phỏng vấn với 83 sinh viên thực tập, 67 nhà tuyển dụng và 7 giảng viên. Nghiên cứu cho thấy kinh nghiệm thực tập đã giúp sinh viên phát triển các kỹ năng và năng lực cần thiết cho công việc tương lai. Dựa trên kết quả nghiên cứu, bài viết đề xuất những cải tiến về chương trình đào

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