Building capacity in a transnational WIL environment: A qualitative inquiry with intern work supervisors in Vietnam

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This paper explores the role of intern work supervisors in Vietnam. Bates (2005) stated that effective internship placements are contingent upon collaborations between the student, academic supervisor and work supervisor. In offshore education, in order for the university to establish this collaboration, it must understand the work supervisor’s perception of their role, as internships may differ between the university’s home setting and the offshore environment. In Vietnam, although many local universities incorporate internships as a degree component, usually the contact between the university academic and the intern’s workplace is minimal or non-existent. Therefore, the authors, from a foreign university in Vietnam that delivers a 12-week internship elective for business undergraduates, conducted 21 interviews with intern work supervisors in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. Two themes of inquiry developed from the interview results indicated that work supervisors valued the contact with the university, were supportive of the interns’ goals, and comfortable in their role as intern assessors. Supervisors also wanted information about the intern before the intern started, and suggested that the university prepare the intern to set goals at the start of the internship.

Keywords: Work integrated learning (WIL); transnational education, cross-cultural collaboration, intern work supervisors, industry collaboration, industry partnerships

INTRODUCTION

Although many universities incorporate Work Integrated Learning (WIL) components into degree programs, there is little research on how WIL elements can be effectively and appropriately integrated into degree delivery in offshore markets (transnational education). This paper focuses on collaboration with work supervisors of business undergraduate interns in a transnational WIL context - a foreign university in Vietnam (FUV).

Links between higher education and internship organisations are weak and undeveloped in Vietnam (World Bank 2008; Tran 2010; British Council 2012; Tran 2012; Tran 2014; Vallely & Wilkinson 2008). In phase one of an ethics-approved research project, we analysed work supervisor ratings given to interns after their 12-week placement. This paper forms part of the second phase of the project: a qualitative inquiry into work supervisors’ internship experiences. The paper examines interview feedback from 21 intern work supervisors in two collaboration-related areas: support of intern learning, and perceptions of academic visits to the workplace.

IMPORTANCE OF WIL STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS

To ensure that degree programs delivered in offshore markets provide graduates with WIL experiences that are equivalent to those provided to students on the host domestic campus but also relevant to local industry, universities need to understand local industry orientations towards work integrated learning.

Figure 1 (adapted from Patrick, C., Peach, D., Pocknee, C., Webb, F., Fletcher, M., & Pretto, G. (2008) illustrates the optimal stakeholder relationship environment for WIL, and frames the critical importance of collaborative relationship systems that underpin effective WIL activities.

A transnational education provider must investigate and understand all elements of the stakeholder environment (Healey 2014). Effective work integrated learning must involve partnership between all stakeholder groups (Bates 2005). However, the disconnect between higher education institutions and industry in Vietnam (Ashwill 2010) undermines the foundations of capacity building and collaboration between universities and employers that, as illustrated by Figure 1, are requisite for effective WIL internships. Work supervisors are positioned at the critical, intersected point (represented as Work Integrated Learning in Figure 1). As front-line Employer stakeholder participants, they directly interact with the Student interns at the workplace, as well as with the University stakeholders – academic supervisors. Therefore, their perceptions warrant exploration. The next section summarises relevant research into the importance of the work supervisor.
Various researchers allude to both the critical role of the work supervisor, possibly the first an intern has ever had, and to the importance of collaboration between the university and the employer (Billett 2009; Bates 2005; Harvey 2005; Henschke 2013). Jackson’s proposed model of graduate skill transfer (2014) identifies workplace characteristics, integrated with program characteristics, as important for skill transfer and personal development. Accordingly, Smith and Smith (2010) state the need to understand industry stakeholders as crucial co-contributors to a work-as-learning culture.

However, collaboration in WIL programs can be problematic for work supervisors if they lack clear understanding of their role with respect to academic elements of WIL, such as assessments, reflections, etc. (Rowe, Mackaway & Winchester-Seeto, 2012). Smith, Mackay, Challis and Holt (2005) claim that academics cannot assume that work supervisors do have this understanding. As collaboration between work supervisors and universities is rare in the Vietnamese higher education environment, this paper explores two possible influential differences in Vietnamese work supervisors’ WIL-related perceptions.

Two themes of inquiry into work supervisors’ perceptions of WIL collaboration

Tran (2014) maintained that higher education in Vietnam is a scapegoat for the low level of employability skills evidenced by Vietnamese university graduates; a dilemma deeply rooted in the historically disconnected stakeholder environment. If work supervisors share this perception, we would not be surprised if they lacked motivation to collaborate with the university. Therefore, one theme of inquiry dealt with work supervisors’ perceptions about collaborating to support intern learning.

In the UK Hejmadi, Bullock, Gould and Lock (2012) found agreement amongst academic supervisors that workplace visits form part of a university’s effective communications strategy. In Vietnam, direct communication between academics and workplace supervisors is rare; workplace visits, rarer still. Effective capacity building requires effective communication; therefore our second theme of inquiry addressed work supervisors’ perceptions of academic visits to the workplace. If supervisors didn’t perceive visits as beneficial, the university could consider crafting a locally-appropriate WIL communications strategy.

METHODOLOGY

The authors conducted ethics-approved, semi-structured 30-minute interviews with a convenience sample of 21 work supervisors responsible for the FUV interns in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City as part of a wider project on WIL implementation by the FUV in Vietnam. To address this paper’s two themes of interest, an inductive approach consistent with exploratory research was taken due to a lack of available research in the Vietnamese context. However, inevitably the authors were influenced both by extant literature and by their experience as
academic intern supervisors at the FUV. Therefore, NVivo 10 selective coding (as opposed to purely inductive in vivo coding) was initially used to code interview comments into this paper’s two themes of interest.

Question item topics that generated the largest volume of coded responses relevant to positive work supervisor perceptions of collaboration in intern learning and work place visits appear in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question item Topic</th>
<th># Sources coded (total 21 sources)</th>
<th>#References to perception of role in intern learning</th>
<th>#References to perception of work visit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coaching/ mentoring</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall experience with FUV</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions for improvement</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Goal setting</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception-academic work visit</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DISCUSSION OF INTERVIEW RESULTS

Perception of the intern – temporary tea maker, free labour, or learner participant?

Weber reported US employer perceptions that college internships could not prepare graduates sufficiently because the interns did “grunt work” and little more (2014); articles in the Vietnamese popular media reflect similar observations (Lam, 2013; VietnamNetBridge 2013). Given the unstructured nature of business university internships in Vietnam, we wanted to know whether work supervisors perceived that interns were there to learn, not just to make tea, copies and do other routine tasks. The interview responses showed commitment to coaching and mentoring – activities were explicitly outlined in many cases as reflected in the large number of coded references in Table 1.

Two responses indicated that interns with customer interface responsibility were not just free labour, but carried out critical duties and therefore needed to be provided with the best learning environment, not only for their own benefit but to ensure satisfactory business and client outcomes.

Perception of role – is it my job to support interns and help maximise their learning?

It was encouraging to find that although supervising interns was not usually part of the work supervisors’ job description they were enthusiastic about giving feedback and mentoring students.

During their work on the project we guide and mentor them and teach them how to solve the problem, this is our common practice to work with the internship, especially the internship with FUV. …. I appreciate that and I enjoy my role. ….

A quote representing some work supervisors’ opinion that although it is not part of their official job description, coaching interns forms part of their own personal and professional development and is therefore seen as a worthwhile endeavour:

It’s extremely comfortable because I can see the coaching and training is a main task of a leader of a team. I myself need to improve my leadership skills and training and coaching skill is a part of the leadership.

Perception of academic workplace visits

Although commonplace in Western higher education, visits by academics to intern workplaces in Vietnam are rare; therefore, it was important for us to find out whether work supervisors felt burdened, annoyed, threatened or simply confused about the purpose of the visits. However all respondents showed support for the visits. Many respondents perceived that the work visits demonstrated professionalism, showed that the university cared for the students, reflected the seriousness of the internship placement, opened lines of communication and opportunities to discuss questions and issues.
For me it feels intern come from a professional school, a good school because the academic supervisor they do really care.

I think the meeting with employer like this is good because that also helps the employer to take serious about the internship or the interns from the university and be more aware that the internship is not only about the employer gaining from the interns but also contributing and supporting the interns to get more skills, to learn more so it's not like one way but should be two ways.

However, one comment indicates initial discomfort with the way the visit was arranged:

… someone, I don't remember who, said there will be someone from FUV coming here to inspect how we can arrange the internship. My feeling is not good, I say 'why FUV is inspecting us?' we are very helpful and very willing to share experience with intern.

This comment shows the need to consider a lack of familiarity with workplace visits, and to anticipate possible cultural differences in interpreting the visit's purpose. A foreign university could be perceived as insensitive, patronising or lacking in trust if basic principles of cross-cultural communication aren't given appropriate attention, especially in initial interactions with the internship organisation.

Suggestions for improvement

Most responses were concerned with improving collaboration aimed at helping supervisors to give more valuable support to interns. Several respondents requested more information on the students’ backgrounds before the internship started, as outlined in the quotes below:

I think before the internship you should give us a checklist what they did and so we can know what we have to train and how we support them.

So if you make a visit, if you have a plan clear like this, we can work easier. We can dig out all the objectives in the plan and we can provide the feedback easily.

Supervisors suggested that interns share goals with the work supervisor at the start of the internship placement, thus enabling the supervisor to provide more personalised and valuable support:

For example, before going to the internship, you should have a self-assessment. After the self-assessment of that student, they know what skills they should improve and come to (organisation), after I assign you with this or with that and you can share with her/his mentor.

An encouraging finding was that many supervisors requested additional communication in order to improve collaborative action to improve internships:

So I suggest that when employee finish their internship do we have a review with university.

CONCLUSIONS

In Vietnam, workplace supervisors supported the FUV's internships activities. Work supervisors perceived that visits showed care to students, and reflected the serious approach of the internship program and professionalism of the university. Work supervisors showed interest in guiding interns' progress and in supporting their academic internship assessments, although this was rarely part of their official job description. They requested more detailed information about intern backgrounds and goals prior to the internship placement that would enable supervisors to provide interns with a better learning experience.

Interview responses, including suggestions for improvement, indicated positive orientations towards collaboration, and an interest in building future capacity. Universities offering WIL transnationally could provide guidelines such as those provided in the Innovative Research Universities’ Guidelines for WIL publication (2012) to their offshore WIL industry partners– adapted to maximise relevance to the local business and cultural context and establish clear guidelines for work supervisors.

Finally, in an offshore environment that is unfamiliar with WIL internships, we recommend that transnational universities introduce internship activities - particularly the role of workplace visits as a method of developing
collaboration for mutual benefit - carefully, in order to avoid misinterpretation due to cultural and experiential differences.

REFERENCES


REFERENCES


Rowe, A., Mackaway, J., Winchester-Seeto, T. (2012). "But I thought you were doing that"- clarifying the role of the host supervisor in experience-based learning. Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education. 13(2) 115-134.


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