

Feedback of students on internship program in an agricultural course

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ABSTRACT

Internship is the essential part of curriculum where students get hands-on experience in training establishments that complement their formal learning in school. Studies on institutional internship programs are done to identify concerns that may hinder its successful implementation. Through the lens of student-interns, this study aimed to assess industry partners and the internship program for undergraduate Animal Science majors, in order to propose strategies toward enhanced internship implementation specifically for the institution's new curriculum for agriculture students. The study utilized the descriptive-evaluative survey method using an adapted and modified questionnaire. Based on the results, the 217 surveyed student-interns assessed their host training establishments to be very satisfactory in terms of facilities, communication, regard for people, empowerment, and work ethics. They rated the internship program as excellent in overall effectiveness, and very satisfactory in policies. The interns seldom encountered problems while training. The proposed action plan gives strategic options in the areas of linkages and policies, to enhance the overall implementation of the internship program, toward optimized benefits for students, industry partners, and the college. This research can contribute to the improvement of internship in agriculture-related courses in higher education institutions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Internship is a necessary part of the curriculum, it is where students get hands-on experience in host training establishments, and get experiences that complement their formal learning in school. Internship experiences bridge academic preparation with real-world applications [1], supporting the practical implementation of knowledge from university in a professional setting [2]. The internship also increases the chances to find a job and to fit in the market [3]. Numerous studies expounded on the significant benefits of internships for schools, including filling an important need for experiential and vocational learning [4], improving the quality of their offering [5], and enhanced reputation and visibility [6].

The assessment of internship partners, and of the effectiveness of internship programs, can help identify issues and problems regarding its implementation. Securing an internship placement will not benefit the student much if it does not provide the appropriate learning experience to acquire job-relevant skills that fit their field of study [7]. Internships also give financial, scheduling, health-related and interpersonal conflicts to students [8]. Hence, studies done in higher education institutions in the Philippines assessed their

own internship programs to provide inputs for improved implementation and satisfaction by students and partner institutions [9]–[12].

Agricultural courses have very few published studies on the assessment of their internship programs compared to other more popular courses in the Philippines. This present study aimed to get the feedback from interns on their host training establishments and on the school's internship program in order to enhance the implementation of local internship. Assessment was done in terms of host establishments' facilities, communication, regard for people, empowerment, and work ethics, and on the overall effectiveness and linkages of the internship program. The researchers used the results in crafting proposed strategies toward the improvement of the internship program in the institution, which may also be applicable to other higher learning institutions offering agricultural program.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The study utilized the descriptive-evaluative survey method in assessing the host training establishments and the internship program. The respondents of the study were 217 students; a complete enumeration of those who were enrolled in the on-the-job-training course during the Summer term (June-August) 2018 in Bulacan Agricultural State College, San Ildefonso, Bulacan, Philippines.

The study used an adopted [10], [11] and modified questionnaire. The first part was composed of the demographic profile of the respondents. The second part consisted of the student interns' assessment of: i) Industry partner or host training establishment; ii) Internship program; and iii) Problems encountered. A Likert scaling technique was used in assessing the level of satisfactoriness of industry partners and the effectiveness of on-the-job training (OJT) program, identifying 5 as excellent (highest) and 1 as not satisfactory/effective (lowest). Similarly, problems encountered during internship were identified according to frequency, with 5 as the highest (very frequently) and 1 as the lowest (never). Members of the study team scheduled the survey per class during their vacant time. The questionnaire was explained and distributed, then retrieved when the respondents were done answering.

The researchers interpreted the mean results of assessment of industry partners and internship program using the following scale: 4.50-5.0 (excellent), 3.5-4.49 (very satisfactory/effective), 2.5-3.49 (satisfactory/effective), 1.5-2.49 (less satisfactory/effective), and 1.0-1.49 (not satisfactory/effective). They also used the following scale to interpret the problems encountered: 4.50-5.0 (very frequently), 3.5-4.49 (frequently), 2.5-3.49 (occasionally), 1.5-2.49 (seldom), and 1.0-1.49 (never).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Feedback of interns on industry partners

The first thing assessed by the students was the facilities in their host training establishments. In the selection of industry partners, the facilities were of paramount importance since the internship coordinators believe that learning will be most adequate in a well-equipped institution. Table 1 presents the interns' feedback on industry partners in terms of facilities. All the indicators obtained a very satisfactory rating, with a composite mean of 4.20. The highest satisfaction was obtained in "farm buildings were well lighted and ventilated" (4.27), "safety and precautionary measures were implemented" (4.24), and "tools, supplies and materials needed for the care of animals at all stages of production are available and functional (4.19)." The indicators with lowest scores but still very satisfactory were "buildings and facilities follow standards for adequate space, hygiene, and animal welfare considerations" (4.15), and "supplies and materials are regularly replenished/ replaced whenever applicable" (4.14). These results imply that the students were very satisfied with the facilities provided in their host training establishments. A study underscored that developing competent skills requires facilities able to support and deliver instruction [13].

Table 1. Interns' feedback on industry partners in terms of facilities

Indicators	Mean	Verbal description
Farm buildings are well-lighted and ventilated.	4.27	Very satisfactory
Tools, supplies and materials needed for the care of animals at all stages of production are available and functional.	4.19	Very satisfactory
Buildings and facilities follow standards for adequate space, hygiene, and animal welfare considerations.	4.15	Very satisfactory
Safety and precautionary measures are implemented.	4.24	Very satisfactory
Supplies and materials are regularly replenished/ replaced whenever applicable.	4.14	Very satisfactory
Composite mean	4.20	Very satisfactory

The other criteria for assessment focused on the organizational culture of the industry partners. Table 2 presents satisfactoriness in terms of collaboration and teamwork, communication, regard to people, and decision-making and empowerment. The table shows that the industry partners obtained very satisfactory ratings in terms of collaboration and teamwork (4.24). The interns indicated that their teams took time to have fun together (4.37), they considered the people with whom they worked with as an effective team (4.27), and the people they worked with care about and trust one another (4.25). The interns also gave very satisfactory ratings to “people with whom I worked made themselves available to others to provide assistance” (4.16) and “person to whom I reported helped me solve problems” (4.15).

Table 2. Interns’ feedback on industry partners in terms of organizational culture

Indicators	Mean	Verbal description
Collaboration and teamwork	4.24	Very satisfactory
The people with whom I worked with are an effective team.	4.27	Very satisfactory
The people with whom I worked with care about and trust one another.	4.24	Very satisfactory
The people with whom I worked made themselves available to others to provide assistance.	4.16	Very satisfactory
The person to whom I reported helped me solve problems.	4.15	Very satisfactory
My team took time to have fun together.	4.37	Very satisfactory
Communication	4.17	Very satisfactory
I had access to the information I needed.	4.18	Very satisfactory
People gave constructive feedback about my work.	4.18	Very satisfactory
People enjoin me in constructive discussion/dialogue.	4.25	Very satisfactory
Communication was clear with no hidden meanings.	4.23	Very satisfactory
Negative gossiping is not sensed in the workplace.	3.99	Very satisfactory
Regard to people	4.21	Very satisfactory
People were listened to as equals regardless of race, gender, position, age, education, or career level.	4.31	Very satisfactory
People were treated fairly.	4.13	Very satisfactory
I felt cared about as an employee/intern.	4.21	Very satisfactory
I felt valued for the work I did.	4.17	Very satisfactory
My development was a high priority.	4.25	Very satisfactory
Decision-making and empowerment	4.13	Very satisfactory
I was given authority to make decisions on my own.	4.08	Very satisfactory
The persons to whom I reported was supportive of my decisions.	4.09	Very satisfactory
I got to provide input when decisions were being made.	4.04	Very satisfactory
I was comfortable raising issues or questions.	4.08	Very satisfactory
I was trusted to do a good job.	4.36	Very satisfactory
Work ethics	4.21	Very satisfactory
The people with whom I worked acted with integrity.	4.18	Very satisfactory
The people with whom I worked take ownership for outcomes and results.	4.18	Very satisfactory
The people with whom I worked care about their work.	4.25	Very satisfactory
The company values employee satisfaction.	4.23	Very satisfactory

The results imply that the interns felt there was collaboration and teamwork during their internship. During the interview of some interns, they said they had time to bond with their co-interns and some trainers during their day off, and sometimes after working hours. Going to the mall, eating out, buying groceries for weekly supplies, exploring tourist spots near internship sites, and even playing mobile games together were some of the moments they had fun together. Collaboration is indeed becoming more essential due to the fast-paced and more complex nature of contemporary work, and there is an emerging understanding of collaboration, a shift from supporting single, stable teams, to supporting and enabling a team of teams [14]. It is good to know that the interns had very satisfactory experiences in their host training establishments in terms of collaboration, since this is an important 21st century skill.

In the feedback of interns on industry partners in terms of communication, the highest ratings were obtained by the indicators “people enjoin me in constructive discussion/dialogue” (4.25) and “communication was clear with no hidden meanings (4.23).” They also indicated that they had access to the information they needed (4.18), people gave them constructive feedback about work (4.18), and that negative gossiping was not sensed in the workplace (3.99). With the composite mean of 4.17, results on communication imply that the interns appreciated the openness of communication in their host establishments. Communication skills play a vital role in the life of professionals [15]. Interns in previous study [16] perceived communication as an essential requirement for their internship. Professional authorities always expect that employees should possess good communication skills along with technical competency. The success of employees depends on the effectiveness with which they absorb and publicize information. Communication is another 21st century skill that agriculture professionals should develop, as it will enable the spread of useful information toward efficient food production systems, and food and environment sustainability.

In terms of “regard to people”, the interns have also rated their host institutions as very satisfactory, with a composite mean of 4.21. The highest mean was achieved in the indicators “people were listened to as equals regardless of race, gender, position, age, education, or career level” (4.31), “my development was a high priority” (4.25), and “I felt valued for the work I did” (4.21). These results imply that interns felt their host establishments highly regarded and valued them. These were very encouraging results because treating people with equality in the workplace is a good virtue to be imbibed by the students. That their hosts also prioritized their development while on training was also fortunate. It is imperative that the school and its partner institutions have the common goal of developing students to their highest potentials.

As shown in Table 2, interns also gave a very satisfactory rating (4.13) to the industry partners in terms of decision-making and empowerment. The students felt that they “were trusted to do a good job” (4.36). The other four indicators had very similar means (4.04-4.09), which were “the persons to whom I reported was supportive of my decisions,” “I was given authority to make decisions on my own,” “I was comfortable raising issues or questions,” and “I got to provide input when decisions were being made.” It is argued that 21st century education should be a key component in preparing citizens to be active, engaged, and informed decision makers and citizens [17]. If students are to take on this role, they need experience in making and implementing decisions of consequence as part of their education.

Table 2 further shows the assessment of industry partners in terms of work ethics. The composite mean derived was 4.21 which was likewise very satisfactory. The highest mean of 4.25 and 4.23, respectively, were in the indicators “the people care about their work” and “the company values employee satisfaction.” There is a significant relationship between work ethics and job performance [18]: i) A suitable code of ethics is important for employees as guidance; and ii) Improving performance do not rely only on compensation and reward system but on work ethics, too.

From the foregoing, it can be gleaned that the interns had an overall very satisfactory assessment of the establishments’ facilities and organizational culture. It will be wise for the institution to maintain its good working relationship with those industry partners, and in the future, find new partners that will have similar facilities and work culture. When a university establishes a relationship with an OJT host establishment, it should try to maintain a stream of students all the time to maintain the relationship with the organization, since initial successful relationships are important to maintain on-going relationship [1].

3.2. Interns’ feedbacks on the internship program

The second part of the study is the feedback of student-interns on the internship program in terms of overall effectiveness and policies as shown in Table 3. The obtained rating of the internship program for overall effectiveness was 4.58 (excellent). The interns gave the highest mean to the ability of the program in providing them with new knowledge and skills (4.72), in providing with strategic knowledge and approaches to address issues in the workplace (4.68), and in updating or enhancing the knowledge or skills already learned in school (4.67). These imply that the interns appraised the learnings in the host establishments to be excellent in effectiveness. Results of the current study agree with the identified internship benefits for students in a previous study [19], which are enhanced competencies and skills and better understanding of workplace realities. In that systematic review of researches on internship, such study elucidated that internship is a win-win situation for its three main stakeholders (students, employers/industry partners, and higher education institutions). Narayanan, Olk, and Fukami [20] reported that the more clearly coordinated the internships with academic coursework, the more students will gain from the overall experience.

Table 3. Interns’ feedback on internship program in terms of overall effectiveness, linkage, and policies

Indicators	Mean	Verbal description
Overall effectiveness and linkage	4.58	Excellent
The ability of the OJT program in providing me with new knowledge and skills.	4.72	Excellent
The ability of the OJT program in updating or enhancing the knowledge or skills that I already learned in school.	4.67	Excellent
The ability of the OJT program in providing me with strategic knowledge and approaches to address the issues in the workplace.	4.68	Excellent
The direct linkage of the school and the establishment I worked during my OJT is effective.	4.44	Very effective
Orientation done by school before my work deployment.	4.43	Very effective
My OJT coordinator’s role in link between the school and the host training establishment.	4.51	Excellent
Policies	4.65	Very satisfactory
Payment of business firm to interns whenever overtime is needed	3.70	Very satisfactory
Provision of rewards for top performing interns	3.79	Very satisfactory
Awareness of the grading system used for my OJT	4.22	Very satisfactory
Information by the firm of my OJT evaluation results before the form was submitted to my internship supervisor.	4.29	Very satisfactory
Number of working hours for my future employment	4.33	Very satisfactory
OJT schedule	4.65	Excellent

Table 3 presents the results on assessment of internship policies, where the interns gave a very satisfactory rating of 4.20. The OJT schedule was rated excellent (4.65), followed by the number of working hours with a very satisfactory mean (4.33). Results imply that the student-interns were very satisfied with the policies, specifically on scheduling and work hours, grading system, and incentives. Research [21] underscores the importance of careful planning, institutional support systems, coordination between academic programs and job-site mentors, and careful attention to legal and ethical issues on internship programs. Since this present study was conducted pre-pandemic, the institution will have to set new policies that should be satisfactory to all stakeholders during the pandemic and post-pandemic periods.

This study listed different problems that students may encounter during internship and students rated them according to perceived frequency of occurrence during their own OJT experience as shown in Table 4. The achieved composite means of 1.65 implies that the students seldom encountered problems during their internship. This is consistent with their very satisfactory rating for the industry partners and internship program, because they will not be satisfied with their internship if they encountered significant problems.

The results are encouraging since they show that the hard work and sacrifices made by the internship coordinators of the institution paid off. The coordinators conduct comprehensive orientation before deployment, and accompany all the groups to their workstations, including livestock and poultry farms in some remote areas. They also regularly monitor the interns through mobile phone calls or texts, and social media, sometimes with the use of personal funds.

Table 4. Interns' feedback on internship program in terms of problems encountered

Statements	Mean	Verbal description
The trainer may not have enough time to teach and supervise the intern	1.76	Seldom
The trainer lacks good working relationship with the intern	1.78	Seldom
The trainer manifests bad habits which may be passed on to the trainee	1.77	Seldom
Supervisors are not willing to listen to suggestions/recommendations	1.63	Seldom
The training method is inefficient	1.60	Seldom
The company gives task/s not related to the specialization	1.71	Seldom
There is a risk of hazard/accident in the workplace	1.65	Seldom
The company is distant from the intern's place	1.67	Seldom
The right facilities and equipment are not available for the practice	1.60	Seldom
Instructions are not clearly defined	1.65	Seldom
The intern experienced some form of harassment	1.38	Never
Composite mean	1.65	Seldom

3.3. Proposed plan of action

The results of student assessment on industry partners and the internship program were either very satisfactory or excellent. In order to propose relevant and appropriate strategies, aside from the results of the survey, the researchers did informal interviews of some industry partners, other internship coordinators, and some of the interns. Furthermore, since the internship program of future batches in the institution will be under a new curriculum, and due to recent developments concerning the pandemic and its effects on education, the researchers of the current study incorporated readings on related studies [22]–[30] into the proposed action plan. The institution may adapt the strategic options provided in the two key result areas of linkages and policies as shown in Table 5, in order to enhance the overall implementation of their internship program toward optimized benefits for students, industry partners, and the college.

To increase the chances of win-win outcome, internship coordinators should inform employers of the outcomes that they can obtain from the partnership, and support companies in verifying the conditions in which they will receive the interns and defining in advance the tasks to be developed [22]. The accreditation level of training hosts from government and private agencies or organizations may be considered. Farms and institutions with accreditation from Department of Agriculture (DA), Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), Department of Tourism (DOT), Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), International Organizations for Standardization (ISO) may have priority for deployment. In a similar study, the category of a training establishment influenced the level of development of the acquired competencies of the interns [23].

Although the institution conducts pre-deployment orientation, the current study gives the first two strategic options under policies to further help students in their preparation. Researchers [16] advocate careful attention to the preparation of students in the experience to empower them in their professional practice, and to get the positive effects of internships on students, including retention, graduation, and employment [25], [27]. The review or benchmarking of structure and duration of internship program in other agricultural higher education institutions, and assessment of the institution's internship program based on Commission on Higher Education's memorandum on Student Internship Program in the Philippines (SIPP), can help in the planning for the new curriculum's internship program [24], [26]. Due to the COVID-19

pandemic, virtual internships have become a new normal in internship programs [30]. The institution may have virtual internship in some specializations in the future, through partnership with capable companies or organizations. Also, online services for monitoring must be in place for ease of access and compliance to everyone concerned.

Table 5. Proposed action plan for the internship program

Key result area	Strategic options
Linkages	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Consultation and dialogues with industry partners regarding their preferred traits/characteristics of interns, and their clear suggestions for the program before signing an agreement. 2. Craft a more comprehensive Memorandum of Agreement/Understanding, specifically regarding the extent of supervision and training, and the giving of directly-related tasks according to the major of specialization. 3. Sustain partnerships with current partners for Animal Science since they all received very satisfactory ratings. 4. Internship in more than one training establishment by each student may be considered. This will greatly enhance their competencies, and broaden their understanding about their chosen discipline/profession. 5. Create a group to scout for new linkages with the appropriate facilities and work culture. 6. Priority may be given to establishments with more accreditations (government, private agencies) and where students can acquire national skills certification while on internship.
Policies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In the orientation procedures for would-be interns, include a pre-deployment expectations survey. 2. Internship coordinators may give seminars on proper work attitudes and behaviors before deployment, in coordination with the Office of Student Affairs. 3. Benchmark the structure and duration of internship program in other agricultural higher education institutions. 4. Assess the compliance of the institutional internship programs to the Commission on Higher Education's SIPP requirements (Student Internship Program in the Philippines). 5. Institutionalize the post-evaluation of industry partners and the OJT program by students. 6. Inclusion of competency standards for each major of specialization in the BS Agriculture program as part of the performance evaluation of interns. 7. Discuss with host training establishments, as applicable, the possibilities of giving monetary incentives in exchange for the services rendered by interns. 8. The institution may include virtual internship and international student mobility program as part of internship. 9. Provide online services for students and industry partners for monitoring, and for convenient and easy access of forms and submission of requirements. 10. Monitor for interns employed by their host establishment after graduation.

4. CONCLUSION

The student interns gave favorable feedback on their host training establishments in terms of facilities and organizational culture. The interns also rated the internship program as excellent in terms of overall effectiveness and linkage, and very satisfactory in terms of policies. They also seldom encountered problems during their internship. The institution may study the adaption of the proposed action plan; its strategic options for linkages and policies may help improve the internship program's implementation in agricultural courses.




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