

Serving an internship: Experiences from Family and Consumer Sciences Department, University of Ghana, programme

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Abstract. The University of Ghana's Family and Consumer Sciences Department's internship reports were examined using 449 intern reports and 209 reports by supervisors presented to the Department over a period of 8 years. The interns' challenges, contributions, strength and weaknesses of the programme during their period of internship were assessed. Content analysis, a technique which allowed researchers to analyze non-statistical material in a systematic way, was used to draw out themes from the data for discussion. Inferential and descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data to address the objectives of the study. The results indicated that the majority of interns worked in hospitals and hotels on assignments related to food and nutrition. They often encountered financial constraints and some had difficulty adapting or adjusting to the environment of work. Administrative duties such as report and memo writing, data collection, photocopying, making and receiving of calls, drawing up budget amongst others were the most contributions interns made. Suggestions made by supervisors and interns included extension of the internship period and the need for the department to seek placement for interns to serve. It was recommended that the monitoring scheme should include visits from lecturers of the department apart from the industry staff.

Keywords: internship, Ghana, challenges, contributions, suggestions, Home Economics, skills, knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

The primary mandate of University of Ghana's Family and Consumer Sciences Department is two-fold: to generate manpower and undertake research with the ultimate aim of creating a healthy home atmosphere for the wellbeing of the family. This mandate is in line with the main goal of Higher Education which is to prepare and equip students for a future and modern working environment and career. In pursuit of this mandate, the internship component of Family and Consumer Sciences program offer graduates the opportunity to acquire theoretical and practical knowledge, work-oriented skills and attitudes needed for effective work performance. Internship has a unique role to close the gap between the academic learning process provided by schools and the practical reality in industry for the development of the

student professionally before entry into the marketplace (Lam and Ching, 2006). Thus, internship as a course provides learning opportunities for students to experience professional practice and activities associated with knowledge application. For university students looking to gain a competitive edge in the job market, an internship programme is an ideal way to gain the edge over other students as this gives students a preview of an industry and reduces the likelihood of unmet expectations.

Internship as a practice

According to Lam and Ching (2006), internship as a form of workplace learning is a vital and valuable component

of many professional programmes in tertiary institutions like universities and polytechnics. Internship should place transferable skills and employability at the heart of a student's curriculum as it inculcates knowledge and skills in students (Lam and Ching, 2006). Internship is recognized worldwide and has a long history. As various types of training in the work environment have developed differently, the terminology in the field varies as well (Busby and Gibson, 2010). Definition of internship is dependent on the cohort of students (interns) participating, its duration, whether paid or unpaid, type of employment (whether a non-profit organization, a government office, or for-profit business), its ultimate objectives as well as the context within which it is organized (Crnković-Pozaić, 2006). For example, it is termed placement or the practicum (Busby and Gibson, 2010), industrial attachment (Effah, 2005), work experience learning (COTVET, 2012), experimental learning (Davies, 1990) and supervised work experience (McMahon and Quinn, 1995) amongst others. A comprehensive definition by True (2012), regard an academic internship as a form of experimental education that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skill development in a professional setting in which an individual takes on responsible roles outside of the traditional university environment for a limited duration while gaining academic grade. Internship, perhaps establishes a connection between education and work (career paths).

This work/learning arrangement is overseen by a faculty or staff member of an educational institution and by a designated employee (supervisor) of an organization. Supervisors are very important for the effectiveness of internship programme; as they mentor students (True, 2012; Collins, 2002; Lee and Chao, 2008). Though students are often known to report negative experience during internship (Biney-Aidoo et al., 2014), such training is of immense benefit to educational institutions, students and industries in diverse ways (Divine et al., 2007). The value of internships has been widely documented. Close collaboration between industry and educational institutions, helps to keep curriculum of educational institutions up to date and make education more relevant and valuable for students, by acquiring information on actual proficiencies required by employers and access the latest tools and equipment in industry (Chen et al., 2011). Thus it enriches the education of students (Allen et al., 2006), benefits academic programs (Spigelman and Grobman, 2006), provides value to local communities and industry partners (Brady, 2007) and generates new knowledge which can contribute to an industry's improved performance (Pertuzé et al., 2010). For industry, internships provide the employer benefits from first choice of best students, best selection of future employees, exposure to new ideas from students and creates network to college(s) (Weible, 2009). It also

provides a "risk-free" method for companies to evaluate prospective hires and hire those who fit the company's culture (Coco, 2000).

Benefits of internship to students

Students gain opportunities to interact with a wide range of age groups, meet potential role models and get feedback through performance assessment (Akomaning et al., 2011) while helping define career ambitions (Coco, 2000). Students develop social experiences and skills, independence (Chen, et al., 2011), core skills demanded by global markets such as communication, time management, self-confidence and self-motivation (Mihail, 2006) and a sense of workplace responsibility and learn about workplace realities (Akomaning et al., 2011). Internship has the advantage of giving students a preview of an industry, higher job satisfaction, better career preparation, better job networking and stronger resumes (Weible, 2009).

While students increasingly demand well-organized internship programs so they can acquire professional skills, industry seeks effective ways to train student trainees to reduce uncertainty in the hiring process in later stages (Tobias, 1996). A bad internship experience can turn a young person away from industry (Fox, 2001). Students and academic representatives (lecturers/supervisors) should assume responsibility for ensuring that an internship will be a value-added experience (Beard, 2007). A student's responsibility should include identification of his or her goals and objectives in undertaking the internship experience and appropriate planning so that the internship is timed to build on previous course work where theories or concepts, knowledge and skills have been established. Beard (2007) stipulated the following objectives of internships to:

- i) Provide students with relevant and practical professional experiences.
- ii) Enhance the student's understanding and application of principles, concepts, and procedures.
- iii) Strengthen interpersonal skills.
- iv) Strengthen problem-solving skills.
- v) Have diverse learning experience.
- vi) Work in a team and collaborating with people with diverse background.

Busby (2003) also identified the following objectives to:

- i) Experience employment and, where appropriate, accept responsibility for the completion of tasks and the supervision of others.
- ii) Obtain an insight into management and management methods.
- iii) Gain greater maturity and self-confidence.

- v) Be involved in the diagnosis and solution of problems.
- vi) Develop attitudes and standards appropriate to career aspirations.

Duration of internships

According to Busby (2003), the framework and duration for internship programmes differ between institutions and depend on the objectives of the programme. For example, the duration may vary from between 12 weeks to 12 months (Busby and Gibson, 2010), four weeks to fourteen months (Busby et al., 1997) and six-month period (Lam and Xiao, 2000; Mihail, 2006; Walo, 2001).

The Family and Consumer Sciences Department's Internship Programme and its objectives

As a field of study and profession, Family and Consumer Sciences, draws from a range of disciplines to achieve optimal and sustainable living for individuals, families and communities. Formerly known as the Department of Home Science, and it was established in the 1966/67 academic year. The internship component has been a part of the Department's programme since its inception. It is one of the few departments in the University that run internship programmes. The department runs a four year Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Arts Degree programs in addition to a two year post graduate degree programs. The courses studied include Food and Nutrition, Textile and Clothing (Fashion), Consumer Education, Family Resource Management, Extension, Family and Child studies. These courses prepare students acquire knowledge and skills to develop their careers for the job market. At the end of the second year (level 200), and during the long vacation, students of the department are attached to fields of study for internships. They search for institutions or agencies that offer work activities that are in relation to their course of study. Letters are taken to agencies, groups, industries of interest to the student requesting placement for internship for the student. The period for attachment is at least 6 weeks. For an integrated and holistic education they could work and acquire practical experience in any of the following: Food Product Development, Food Service Management, Sensory Evaluation, Principles of Food, Textiles and Clothing, Family Resource and Management, Human Development and Child Studies since the areas have direct relation to the course of study of the student.

For the student (intern) training to be truly successful, the programme has to be strategically planned and a proper link established between the theories learnt in school and the practical aspect in the work place. Internship therefore is sought from areas related to the curriculum. The aim and objectives for which students of

the department are involved in the internship programme are to:

- i) Become acquainted with some of the opportunities for employment in Family and Consumer Science and related fields.
- ii) Gain firsthand knowledge of the particular requirements of a job and the expectations of the employer.
- iii) Learn through experience of some of the skills required of the Family and Consumer scientist such as food handling, textile and apparel design and resource management.
- iv) Contribute to the programme of work of the agency to which they are attached.
- v) Begin to recognize the objectives of the agencies and how Family and Consumer Scientist can help.

Expectations of student at the workplace

In Ghana industrial attachment as a form of linkage between theory and practice is still minimal and there are no established criteria for screening prospective interns (Effah, 2005). Neither does the department screen prospective companies. The role of the student includes liaison with the site supervisor, to explain to the supervisor on what has been studied and what the Department expects from the student and the work to be done. The students themselves are given the go ahead to choose organizations that were engaged in activities related to the Family and Consumer Sciences program. The student is to study the employing agency, the kind of work the agency does, ask questions, take notes and observe the activities of workers in the institution. Also, the student is to determine what contribution he/she can offer in 6 to 8 weeks period and how his work will fit into the total programme of the agency. He should then make a work plan and/or discuss the plan with his supervisor to carry out the work as expected. As a learner, he should ask for guidance, supervision and be criticized; keep a daily diary of the things he does each day and at the end, have a discussion with his supervisor and others with whom he have worked about his accomplishment, contribution, successes and failures.

The intern is required to submit a 4 to 6 pages report to the department on completion. The report should include job description, weekly reports regarding progress during the internship, which involves detailed descriptions of tasks and assignments, accomplishments, challenges, how academic preparation provided appropriate background for the student to perform tasks and suggestions or recommendations for future student-attachment. Supervisors are therefore expected to supervise and offer timely opinion and comment for students. From the supervisor, the department requires a

report on intern's responsibilities and contributions to the establishment, strength/weaknesses and comment on the overall performance. These evaluations count in the overall assessment of the students. The internships program must therefore be conducted within a structured framework where intern, employer and campus coordinator, play a vital role.

The goals of the study were to collate, document and analyze reports on types of organisations interns had worked with, assignments given them, challenges faced and contributions made over a 9 year period. It also identified the strength and weaknesses of students as observed by supervisors. The potential for an improvement for all stakeholders, the students, educational institutions, and beneficiaries lies in the identification of the challenges and suggestions for improvement.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed quantitative and descriptive approaches to collate and document information from the reports on internship submitted to the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Ghana. The use of secondary data, since the data were already in the possession of the department and ready for use, was purposively selected to obtain relevant information from students and evaluators. The study population was Level 300 students of the Department in the academic years of 2003/2004 to 2009/2010, and 2012/2013 to 2013/2014 (reports for 2010/2011 and 2011/2012 were not available to researchers) and some supervisors from industry under whom they worked. The researchers examined 449 intern reports and 209 reports from supervisors presented to the department over the periods under review. The data were hand coded and analyzed manually, using content analysis to draw out themes related to the objectives. The results were descriptively presented using frequency and percentage distributions under the following headings:

- i) Identification of organizations interns sought and assignments engaged in.
- ii) Challenges faced by interns.
- iii) Strength and weaknesses of students as observed by supervisors.
- iv) Suggestions made by students and supervisors towards improvement.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Identification of organizations interns sought and assignments engaged in

Findings revealed that 34.3% of students sought internship in the hospital (both the Ghana Health Service and private health services) whilst 27% were in the

hospitality industry (hotels, guest houses and restaurants) within the period under study. Some students sought internship in organizations such as Metropolitan and District Assemblies (11%), schools at different levels (9%), Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO's, 5%) and Manufacturing industry (5%). Others (less than 3% each) sought theirs with various Private and Public firms, Construction and Insurance firms. Others include Ghana Cocoa Board, Engineering Hydrological and Environmental Services, Ghana Standard Authority, Food and Drugs Board, Environmental Protection Agency, Textile Manufacturing Companies, Shopping Malls, Travel and Tour companies, Garment manufacturing companies, Land-landscape and Interior Decoration Companies, Textile Designing Companies, Furniture Manufacturing Companies, Fan Milk Company to mention a few.

Reasons for choice of organisations

The health and the hospitality organizations seem to be the two areas of interest to interns. Proximity of establishments to students' residence and convenience might have greatly influence students' choice of workplace. It is not mandatory for organizations to pay supplementary allowance, or give facilities such as housing, transportation. Students often chose establishments close to their residence to save time and money.

Assignments given to interns at place of work

Most interns were assigned multiple responsibilities. Among these, 125.8% of assignments were related to food and nutrition. Some of these assignments include table setting, polishing of cutleries, preparation and serving of meals, counseling of patients, giving of talks on nutrition-related issues, nutritional data assessment, menu planning, food packaging, and sensory evaluation. Approximately, eighty nine percent (88.6) of the assignments were related to Resource Management with some of the activities including filing of documents, planning a budget, supervision, stock taking, report writing, record and book keeping, management of youth centers, and sponsorship seeking whilst 40.8% were assigned to duties in Clothing and Textile (tie-dye and batik making, making of textile designs, laundry work, cleaning of rooms, cutting of patterns). These areas offer activities related to their fields of study.

Contributions made by interns

Forty-three percent of interns were given administrative duties of the institutions they served. They filed documents, typed and e-mailed reports, memos and letters, recorded of information and wrote letters. Interns

Table 1. Challenges faced by the interns.

Challenges	F	%
Financial constraints	83	20.8
Adapting and adjusting	68	17.0
Transportation difficulties	67	16.8
Work duration	58	14.5
Content	55	13.8
Placement	52	13.1
No cooperation from colleagues	51	12.8
No orientation	49	12.3
Overwhelmed with responsibilities	46	11.5
Overworked	46	11.5
Unappreciated or used	43	10.8
Poor environment	38	9.5
Insufficient supervision	31	7.8
Communication and language barrier	24	6.0
Unsafe practices	11	2.8
Teaching large classes	9	2.3
No breaks in between work	9	2.3
Poor hygiene facilities	8	2.0
Working overtime	7	1.8
Limited space to work	3	0.9
Inability to use equipment on field	3	0.9
Others (Less than 1 percent each)	23	5.8
Total	784	197

*Multiple responses.

were able to offer simplified organizational skills that enhanced work output, reduced work time and were very reliable.

Seventeen percent prepared and served food under hygienic and sanitary conditions. Four percent were involved in counseling and teaching at antenatal clinics in hospitals. Others (less than 2% each) were sales representatives and personnel, librarians, receptionists, supervisors, research assistants, laboratory assistants, extension officers, data entry clerks and inventory clerks, in the organisation in such they served. In the schools, they taught different courses at different levels including caring for kids in nursery and kindergarten. The monitored work or service experiences could provide students insight into the operations of management, gain an understanding of such skills as decision making skills, critical thinking skills, and knowledge required in the workplace. Their involvement in the diagnosis and solution of problems will help them gain greater maturity, increased confidence and self-esteem. Almost all the students (99.7%) reported that the jobs they were engaged in were related to their programme of study.

Challenges faced by the interns

While 89% of the interns on the field agreed they faced

challenges 11% said they did not. Table 1 shows challenges the interns faced.

Most interns were not paid. Nearly 21% reported of financial difficulties. They either walked to their workplaces or stayed away from work on days they had no money. Transportation to and from workplace was a challenge. They struggled their way through traffic and join long queues for vehicles in order to get to work or home after work. Some described this as stressful. Fifteen percent indicated that adapting and adjusting to the work environment was a challenge. They were of the view that they received little or no orientation and that some of their superiors felt they will end up losing their jobs to them. This affected their ability to freely adapt and adjust to their places of internship.

For 14.5% of interns, period within which internships run were considered to be too short. Just when interns thought they were beginning to settle down to work and enjoy the benefits of their attachment, the 6 to 8 weeks were over. Mihail (2006) studied internships in Greek universities and also noted that interns complained about short periods which do not give them ample time to study on the field. Mapuranga and Bukaliya (2014) noted that short amount of time for internship does not allow students become fully functional employees as there is always a lot to learn.

About 14% admitted they sometimes could not

demonstrate learnt skills and competencies related to the school program at the workplace. This some said was due to insufficient theoretical knowledge (content of theory) about on-going activity and this could make them feel totally lost. This affected their confidence and image amongst colleagues thereby reducing the interest and benefits associated with internships. Perhaps they did not make sufficient connections between what they learnt at school and the practices at their workplace. Often, if mistakes made on the job have severe consequences, they may not perform as expected and may be afraid to make a mistake.

Though the majority of interns were able to gain placement in various workplace easily, 13.1% had challenges seeking placement. Interns were not able to either secure a place for the attachment of their choice immediately or responses were delayed. Often they had to move from office to office in the ministries, agencies, companies. Inadequate knowledge or information of the various institutions and agencies limited their search for placement.

Some interns (12.8%) reported that they did not easily get the needed help and support (cooperation) from workers in the workplace. Some workers, realizing their presence, would leave their post, or would not participate in activities, especially when the boss was not looking on or is absent. Rothman (2007) found that interns are seen by some organisations as cheap labour while Perlin (2011) indicated that, organisations may displace paid workers for interns because they will not be paid. Some of the interns experience having to repeatedly fill in for absent teachers in addition to accomplishing their assigned jobs. These could result in interns feeling used as, indicated by about eleven percent of interns.

Twelve percent had no orientation course or talk organized for them as newcomers in a new environment. These interns could poorly adapt or adjust to the new environment or could lack clear guidance for the work they were engaged in. Perhaps this accounted for some interns indicating that adapting and adjusting to the work environment was a challenge. Twelve percent of interns reported they were sometimes over-whelmed with work. These interns could feel frustrated however being exposed to real-world problems and issues which cannot be offered in a classroom could make them develop skills related to time management.

While nearly 12% felt they were often over-worked, eleven percent said Management did not acknowledge or reward their contributions. Such negative or bad experiences can turn a young person away from the industry (Fox, 2001) just as internship dissatisfaction negatively influences students' confidence in their future career development (Ko, 2007). About eight percent of the interns said there was insufficient supervision of their work for the period of the attachment. Perhaps they expected visitations from lecturers of the department and constant checks from mentors at the workplace. Six

percent of interns who chose to teach had communication difficulties due to language barrier (pupils being taught were challenged with the understanding of the English language and sought to teach in local dialects). While less than three percent (2.3%) reported of teaching classes that were too large. Interns (2.8%) reported poor hygiene and unsafe practices (2.0%). These interns were challenged with unclean toilet and bath room facilities and also indiscriminate dumping of refuse around the surroundings of the workplaces. Some interns (2.3%) reported they often had no breaks in-between work, and 1.8% reported they worked overtime sometimes. Less than 1% reported stress from work, inability to use some of the equipment's in the institutions, limited space provided for work, and unavailability of meals in workplace and its environs leading the hunger.

Strength of interns as observed by the supervisors

The majority of supervisors (67%) indicated that the interns exhibited traits of hard work, eagerness to learn and desire to "prove themselves", that is, to show that they are capable of working without constant checks or supervision. The interns worked conscientiously, were disciplined, reliable, responsible and often motivated to work. Generally, the supervisors were satisfied with interns' performance. Thirteen percent indicated they saw a future for the interns in their organization because the interns seemed emotionally attached to the organizations. Seven percent of the supervisors stated that the interns took initiative, accepted criticism and worked independently. The supervisors observed that some interns were able to use the period to determine their field of interest thus creating contacts for future placements.

Weaknesses of interns as observed by supervisors

The supervisors (24%) found some to be slow in activities they engaged in. Those interns who could not withstand pressure associated with the workplace were noted by 16% of the supervisors. They complained unnecessary about jobs or assignment given. A study by Wang (2002) on the evolution of higher education in hospitality in Taiwan revealed that many interns are unable to handle the pressure of work related challenges. Thirteen percent of the supervisors reported that interns had inadequate knowledge about the assigned job while eleven percent observed that some interns appeared too quiet, shy or reserved and lacked the courage and confidence to approach supervisors when faced with a problem.

Seven percent of the supervisors indicated that the duration of the internship was too short as interns had a lot more to learn on the field of work while another seven percent suggested that there should be visits from

lecturers of the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences to monitor students and to complement supervision from industry so that the internship programme could be effective. The supervisors who reported that interns should learn to strengthen interpersonal skills and problem-solving skills were three percent.

Suggestions made by the interns and supervisors towards the improvement

Both supervisors (17%) and interns (22%) suggested an extension of the time for the internship in order to achieve the aims of the internship. Less than 10% each thought if the department could use industry practitioners as adjunct lecturers it may help improve relationship between the department and industry and encourage collaboration to invest in research and development.

Supervisor's suggestions

The six to eight weeks duration was too short for the interns to learn a lot from the various departments in the organization the intern found themselves. It was suggested that the department should consider increasing the number of periods for the internship instead of only one period of attachment. Less than 3% supervisors said that lecturers from the department should go round to observe the interns performance on the field apart from the industry staff. This they thought will help improve the quality of the internship programme. Approximately two percent of supervisors suggested that, the internships programme be sought during the long vacation, at the end of the second semester of the third year (level 300). They thought this will allow students gain more knowledge and skills in the lecture halls.

Interns' suggestions

Eighteen percent of the interns thought the department should aid interns seek placements in industry. Some suggested a direct involvement of the department by establishing links with different industries, especially those with opportunities for employment in Family and Consumer Science and related fields. Placement for interns is a thorny issue for institutions, students and employers. Often there is confusion as to who should arrange for internships (Gault et al., 2000; Tackett et al., 2001). Tackett et al. (2001) however indicated that faculty should work for placement for students.

Approximately 8% of interns and 3.4% of supervisors suggested that there should be a brief letter describing the department's programme of study to the industry interns seek placement. Interns indicated that supervisors on the field sometimes found it difficult to assign specific

jobs to interns because the name and aim of the programme which suggests "creation of a healthy home atmosphere for the wellbeing of the family" made it difficult for placement in a work environment. Seven percent of interns also suggested that, the internships programme be sought during the long vacation, at the end of the second semester of the third year (level 300) to allow student gain more knowledge and skills in the lecture halls before going to the field.

Five percent of the interns suggested that provision of incentives be made either by the department or organization they were attached to ease some of the financial difficulties. Three percent of the interns suggested that practical courses in the department should be increased so that interns could be more skillful, especially in the food and clothing courses to help them develop good hands-on performance before going into industry.

Less than 3 percent of the interns also suggested that lecturers from the department go round to observe and assess the interns' performance on the field. This they thought would motivate students and make them feel recognized. Less than one percent of interns were of the view that some of their colleagues did not take the attachment seriously and there was a need for lecturers of the department to monitor students especially those attached to private industries.

CONCLUSION

Internships are a vital part of many academic programmes and play an important role in the transition of students (interns) from the college environment to the work environment. Students should be encouraged to engage in an internship experience and the department should collate feedback from students' experience which will help inform the effective and well-rounded training of the students for the job market. Though interns faced challenges like financial difficulties, they contributed to activities of the organizations they were attached especially to administrative work. Both supervisors and interns suggested increasing duration for internship and visits from lecturers to students on attachment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Perhaps the department should invite employers during employment/industrial fair on campus to enlighten potential interns and create a network of contacts. This will aid in bridging gap that sometimes exist between academia and industry. Such invitation could also address the challenge of both supervisors and interns who suggested that there should be a brief letter describing the department's programme of study to the industry interns seek placement. Perhaps it is time for the

department to consider suggestions for increasing the duration for internship and visits from lecturers to students on attachment.

Since internship is becoming a common practice in many institutions lately, legislation should be put in place to streamline the process of internships in Ghana. This will help in identifying which institutional body is responsible for the welfare of interns, industry demands, the risk attached to having an intern in an organization and promote benefits of internship programme. As a policy, the government and the university should jointly design curriculum to feed into the national manpower plan. Again, the government as a policy should offer tax incentives to companies that can prove they invest in training interns.

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