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# Students' experiences with the business internship program at Kuwait University



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## ABSTRACT

This study assessed students' experiences with the business internship program at Kuwait University (KU) as well as the effect of a number of individual and situational characteristics on those experiences. The analysis revealed five internship impact areas, including adaptability to the workplace (AWP), team-playing capability (TPC), professionalism (PR), computer & communication skills (CCS), and career potential (CP). Interns were generally satisfied with the program. They believed that the internship improved their AWP, TPC, PR, CCS, and CP. However, the intern's major influenced satisfaction as the interns majoring in accounting, finance, and management information systems (MIS) were more satisfied with their experiential learning than were their counterparts majoring in economics, management, and marketing. In addition, the year of the internship influenced the interns' satisfaction as the 2013 interns reported lower satisfaction with the improvement in their AWP, TPC, PR, and CCS than did the 2010 interns. These findings and their theoretical and practical implications are further discussed in the paper.

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## 1. Introduction

Learning is a continuous process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. It takes place through a cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualization and experiment (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Fry, 1975). Merely lecturing to students in the classroom without giving them recourse to the real world leaves them without thorough learning of the subject matter. In addition, business programs are too narrow and disconnected from the real world of business (Ackerman, Gross, & Perner, 2003; Porter & McKibbin, 1988). Therefore, there is a perceived disconnect between the abstract and theoretical bias of business schools and the pragmatic needs of the business world.

More than half a century ago, Bloom (1956) highlighted the importance of teaching students how to apply the knowledge and concepts they acquire in the classroom. Since then, educational institutions have been increasingly required to produce highly skilled graduates who are able to respond to the ever-changing and complex needs of the contemporary workplace (Ackerman et al., 2003; King, 2003; Sleezer, Gularte, Waldner, & Cook, 2004). Finding a way to ensure that students take what they learn in abstract form and apply and practice it in real workplaces is seemingly the most obvious and useful way of solving this dilemma (Meredith & Burkle, 2008).

Cooperative (co-op) education and internship are two structures that are most often adopted by educational institutions to describe experiential learning opportunities for business students (Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2000). While co-op programs—e.g., part-time field experiences—are heavily used in engineering and other technical fields, internships are usually

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undertaken while students are concurrently enrolled in classes. Within the internship framework, students spend some time within an office inside an organization, and are exposed to a full range of challenges and daily work of that organization (Franeck, 2005; Rothman, 2007).

The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB, 2013) has recommended that business schools tightly link their programs to the business world and cites internships as one mechanism for accomplishing this goal. Consequently, the majority of business schools worldwide offer varying forms of internships as a component of their curricula (Coco, 2000; Hergert, 2009; Kim, Kim, & Bzullak, 2012; Maskooki, Rama, & Raghunandan, 1998; Rothman, 2007). These schools should ensure that their internship programs reflect the reality of today's employment market and what students expect from such programs (Cannon & Arnold, 1998). Although internships have been shown to have value for students, employers, and universities, they do not come without problems (Chen, Hu, Wang, & Chen, 2011; Cook, Parker, & Pettijohn, 2004), and their full educational benefit may not be realized (Alpert, Heaney, & Kuhn, 2009). In other words, if internship programs are not carefully thought out and consistently assessed, they may result in a disappointing experience for the interns (Hite & Bellizzi, 1986).

The business program at Kuwait University (KU) provides experiential learning opportunities to students through an internship program. The program is designed to provide students with the opportunity to acquire practical training via enrollment in a three-credit hour summer course (480). However, since the inception of that program in 1999, there has been no evidence gathered through scientific inquiry on its effectiveness and the students' perceived value of their experiential learning experience. Students are expected to perceive an internship as successful if they have positive experiences, gain personal benefits, and improve their employment prospects (Chen et al., 2011; Gupta, Burns, & Schiferl, 2010).

The purpose of this study was twofold: (1) assess the students' experiences with the business internship program and determine whether participation in the program helped enhance the intended benefits (skills and abilities) of students; (2) explore the effect that the students' demographic and situational characteristics (e.g., gender, major, GPA, credit hours, and year) might have on the perceived benefits of the program. The findings of this study should contribute to the growing body of knowledge on global business experiential learning and serve as a foundation for actions aimed at improving the business internship program at KU.

The rest of the paper is organized accordingly: a research background is presented first, followed by research methodology, analysis and results, discussion of the research findings, research implications, research limitations, and conclusions.

## 2. Background

There is a perceived disconnect between the abstract and theoretical bias of business schools and the pragmatic needs of the business world (Angelidis, Tomic, & Forahim, 2004). Although business students are well-versed in theories and knowledge, they lack the ability to apply them in solving business problems (Candy & Crebert, 1991). In response to such a deficiency in students' learning, there has been growing consideration in higher education for incorporating experiential learning opportunities into academic programs, including business (Alpert et al., 2009; Knemeyer & Murphy, 2001, 2002). Experiential learning—i.e., work integrated learning—describes educational activities that integrate theoretical learning with its application in the workplace (McLennan & Keating, 2008). Nevertheless, higher education institutions have implemented experiential learning in curricula in different forms.

### 2.1. Internship as a form of experiential learning

As an integral part of professional education, experiential learning manifests in several forms depending on the discipline field. Such forms may include internships, field experience, cooperative education, sandwich programs, clerkships, practicum, cadetships, community-based learning, service-learning, live-case projects and the like (Aggett & Busby, 2011; Farazmand, Green, & Miller, 2010; Gupta et al., 2010; Karns, 2005; McLennan & Keating, 2008; Ryan, Toohey, & Hughes, 1996). Subsequently, experiential learning activities may vary substantially across different curricula in terms of the type of student's participation, individuals involved in making the arrangement, the duration of the experience (course), timing within a course (in-term or vacation, first year to final year), relationship to other course content, elective or compulsory part of course, project or research-based, assessment, remuneration, and teaching/supervisory practices (McLennan & Keating, 2008).

Practicums and internships, for instance, are a one-time work or service experience done by a student as part of an academic class. Both involve a student working in a professional setting under the supervision and monitoring of practicing professionals. However, a major difference between a practicum and an internship involves the degree of expected involvement of the student with hands-on work. While practicums allow a student to observe and document how working professionals perform their job responsibilities and participate to a limited extent in performing work-related tasks, internships allow a student to take on a real job focusing on independent application of skills and knowledge in the workplace setting (Ryan et al., 1996).

Similarly, sandwich placement or work placement, which are two British terms that are equivalent to the American term of "internship", denote a temporary job that a student does as part of a course of study in order to gain practical experience (Aggett & Busby, 2011). Cooperative education, on the other hand, provides students with multiple periods of work in which the work is related to the student's major or career goal. The typical program plan is for a student to alternate terms of full-time classroom study with terms of full-time, discipline-related employment. In addition, live-case projects, on the

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