Virtual internship programme: A curriculum innovation

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Abstract

Virtual internship programme allows students to obtain real-world work experience in a business environment anytime, anyplace, and at any pace. Participants in virtual internship programmes have the flexibility of working from home or school using personal or campus computing facilities. As long as the student has a phone, Internet and fax, he/she can work from virtually anywhere. Instructors can meet with their interns online to provide guidance and feedback. Most significantly, virtual internships eliminate geographical barriers and let students gain expertise and learning from instructors and business professionals from anywhere. Many businesses today are accepting students doing virtual internship programmes at their firms. Nevertheless, it is found that less research has been done to study these issues, proving that there is a knowledge gap issue in this area of study. This paper therefore presents the emerging opportunity and need for virtual internship program in future, based on the digital working era, where there is a crucial need to revise and redesign the assessment rubric which can be used to assess virtual internship programmes.

Keywords: Virtual internship, internship, practicum training

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, employers and students alike have widely accepted the internship as a method for students to gain work experience in real world organisations. Interns, who are prospective employees can demonstrate that they can perform work and relate with others in a work environment, thereby increasing the likelihood of them being offered a job after graduation (Eneriz, 2019; Parker, 2019).

Alike other professional degree programmes in general, the pressure to produce work-ready graduates among accounting degree programmes has been highlighted (Jackson and Chapman, 2012). The scarce in suitably skilled graduates (Sondergaart and Murthi, 2012) continues to be highlighted by graduate employers as well as the accounting profession. The lack of values includes technical skills (Boyce et al., 2012; Gray and Collison, 2002), lack of appropriately contextualised work-experience opportunities (Fleming, 2008; Guile and Griffiths, 2001), and limited soft-skill development opportunities (Fleming, 2008).

Nevertheless, looking through the spy glass of employers, internships may be a cost-effective answer to the expenses associated with recruiting new hires. Moreover, studies show that graduates seeking jobs can increase their likelihood of being hired and improve their potential earnings if they have completed an internship placement (Black and Bachman, 2007). Moreover, internships are recognized as important components of higher education, combining classroom learning and experiential learning (Clitero & Levenson, 1986; Stanton, 1992). Thus, students who have completed an internship get the opportunity to grab the position offered in their field soon after graduation (McDaniel & White, 1993; Kaman & Kretovics, 1999, Henry, Razzouk, & Hoverland, 1988).

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However, there are some problems and issues concerning the traditional way of doing internship. One of the major issues on the traditional internship faced by employers includes the inability to expand internship opportunities for interns and the choice of interns for employers from those found within the radius of a local commute to nearly anywhere in the world. Morever, during the Covid 19 pandemic situation, remote and virtual choice of working nature was much prefered and may be the solution for the employers and interns who need to abide by the Work From Home instructions by the Malaysian Government (https://www.mkn.gov.my/web/ms/sop-pkp-pemulihan). In addition, many students must work a full- or part-time job in addition to their higher institution's project requirements and family responsibilities. Many students are facing a hard time to cope with these issues thus completing a traditional internship for these students is very challenging (Black and Bachman, 2007).

Virtual internship programme therefore can help students to avoid scheduling conflicts while gaining valuable experience in the real world of work. Video conferencing and virtual classroom technologies allow communications between students, employer and faculty to support and guide interns with an immediacy and frequency impossible to match in face-to-face meetings or telephone exchanges. Asynchronous learning platforms enable interns to submit assignments, read the work of others, comment on the contributions of others and share advice and experiences while off-campus. The relevant virtual communication tools used in most businesses today deem necessary for workplace success.

2.   VIRTUAL INTERNSHIP

Many businesses today are accepting students doing virtual internship programmes at their firms. Participants in virtual internship programs have the flexibility of working from home or school using personal or campus computing facilities. As long as the student has a smart device and internet, he/she can work from virtually anywhere. Instructors can meet with their interns online to provide guidance and feedback. Most significantly, virtual internships eliminate geographical barriers and let students gain expertise and learning from instructors and business professionals from anywhere.

Virtual internship also allows students to work remotely and work on their own schedule. They communicate and collaborate in a virtual workspace - no matter where they live or what time zone they are in. Interns are virtually linked with the institution and the world of work. Industries benefit from having (a) the interns/faculty work on real world projects which make a direct contribution to industrial productivity, (b) direct access to the faculty experts in the participating college/university and (c) virtual employees at minimal cost. In addition to this, benefits to the college/university include (a) faculty development through their involvement with the interns in the on-going real-time projects in the industry, (b) feedback from the industry on the curriculum and (c) consultancy opportunities (Black and Bachman, 2007).

Another virtual internship concept which is an immersive virtual workplace simulation, is built based on the technical strength of traditional programmes whilst concurrently fostering the development of well-contextualised workplace-related soft-skills in an immersive virtual workplace setting. Developing technologies have improved the variety and functionality of mixed reality technologies. A model on the virtual internship was developed that allows students to gain technical expertise within a virtual workplace setting without prioritising vocational training over educational outcomes. (Bayerlein, 2015).

Figure 1 shows the concept of virtual internships designed to exploit the similarity between the challenges faced by students and interns (Black and Bachman, 2007). When students assume the role of interns, learning- and work-related activities are blended into an immersive scenario in which solutions to learning challenges enable work challenges to be addressed. Virtual internships develop students' technical knowledge and workplace-related soft-skills by framing peer-interactions, the engagement with resource materials, and the relationship between students and the academic in an immersive virtual workplace simulation. Through their role as interns, students explore real-world work challenges in a nonthreatening environment whilst receiving mentorship and peer-support from the academic and their fellow interns.
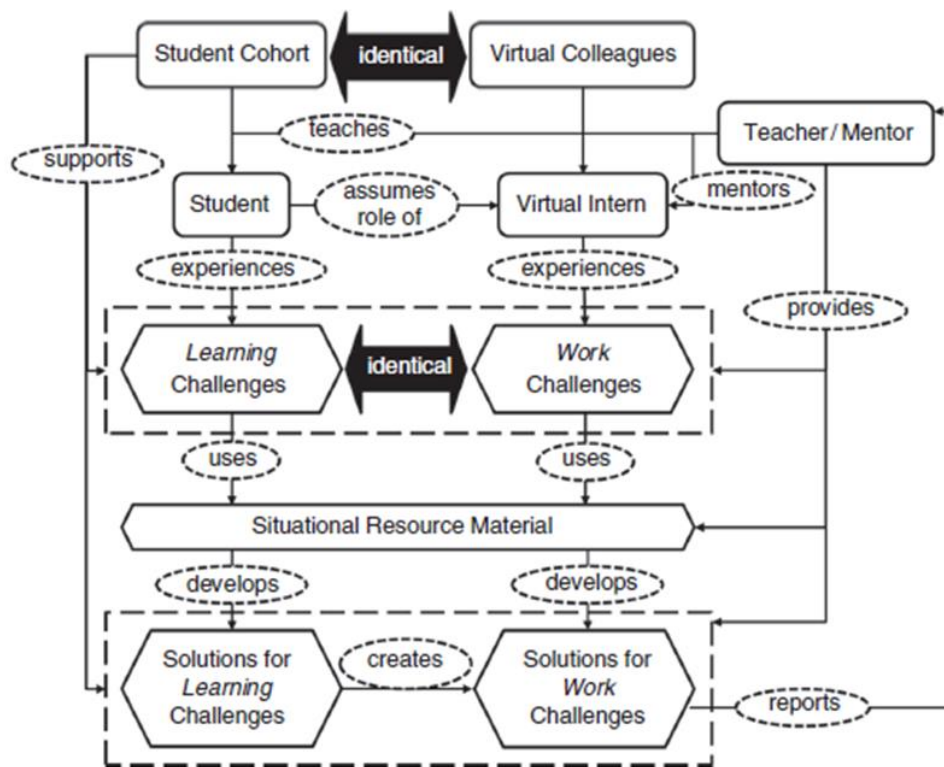
Fig. 1. Virtual internship concept

However, this paper is more focused on the virtual internship which involves students engaged with a real company virtually, getting to communicate and getting feedback using virtual communication platforms used in most universities for online classes, creating a virtual internship setting which could solve problems related to the inability to expand internship opportunities for interns at international companies anywhere in the world.

3. PEDAGOGICAL GAP IN VIRTUAL INTERNSHIP

Prior studies in internship focused on the interns and on success factors or satisfaction from the intern's perspective (Beard & Morton, 1998; Franks & Oliver, 2012; Greer, 2013; Jeske & Axtell, 2013) Several studies also focused on the intern's supervisor's experience and issues affecting success or satisfaction of the intern particularly on interpersonal working relationships among internship participants (Gardner, 2013; Youngblood, 2020).

On the other hand, studies on virtual internships is very lacking, while Youngblood (2020) tried to fill the gap and studied on how student interns and intern supervisors can establish and sustain a working relationship by communicating via remote communications technologies, His study contributes to understanding in this area that is of importance to a wide range of theorists, researchers, businesses, academic institutions, and practitioners.

Virtual internship therefore seems to be able to provide employers and students with opportunities unconstrained by geography while easing requirements such as finding a place to work, commuting, and time management issues. However, a virtual internship may have issues associated being unfamiliar with a work community but unable to join that community physically, and the need for supervisors, interns, and co-workers to establish and sustain a working relationship while being unable to meet in-person.

Synchronous and asynchronous communication technologies may help alleviate some of the problems associated with directing and appraising student internships. Instructors recognize that technology use for teaching can augment pedagogy (Althaus, 1997, Laurillard, 1987; McComb, 1994) and assist interns during their internship in regards to communication between interns, employers and university facult thus enable interns to grab better placement in today's competitive job markets (Palmer, Collins, & Roy,1996). The opportunity to offer virtual

internships using computer-mediated communication is particularly promising when the internship placement is valued as an academic class worthy of pedagogical improvement.

Nevertheless, it is found that less research has been done to study these issues, proving that there is a knowledge gap issue in this area of study. According to Youngblood (2020) virtual internship has not been well studies despite being able to offer advantages over other in-person trial work. Therefore, research is needed to explore the the concept and nature of this relatively new innovative curriculum. It is also important to understand how participants establish and sustain working relationships remotely as this particular issue has not been extensively focused in past research, taking into consideration how the innovation can be crucial to the internship's success.

4. ASSESSMENT GAP IN VIRTUAL INTERNSHIP

4.1 Assessment of traditional accounting degree programmes in Malaysia during pandemic

Traditional undergraduate accounting degree programmes are often focused on training, rather than education (Boyce, 2004; Evans, 2010). Traditional programmes are focused on training because the mastery of technical knowledge is widely regarded as their most important learning outcome (Boyce et al., 2012; Gray and Collison, 2002). Given that a training focus implies that learning activities are aimed at the development of a narrow set of technical skills for subsequent repetition in the workplace (Evans, 2010), Improvements in the workplace readiness of graduates would be expected. However, traditional degree programmes continue to be criticised for their inability to create work-ready graduates (Howieson, 2003; Rosenberg et al., 2012; Sondergaart and Murthi,2012).

In addition to this general criticism, traditional degree programmes are seen to lack soft-skill development opportunities (Gray and Collison, 2002), as well as contextualised learning activities that encourage students to engage with the profession (Fleming, 2008; Guile and Griffiths, 2001).

In one of the Malaysian universities, students in the Bachelor of Accounting programme will undego thier internship program during their final semester (8th semester) of their study. During the semester affected by the Covid 19 pandemic, students are advised to opt to work from home if the employers allow them therefore their nature of internship was conducted remotely (or virtually).

The employers need to fill in the assessment form provided by the faculty, to evaluate the students and to grade them. The assessment rubric used however was based on the normal internship programs structure which was not designed to suit the virtual/remote internship programme.

Based on the report for semesters (affected by the pandemic), employers which had to conduct their internship supervision virtually/remotely, could not give a reasonable score to the traits which they could not assess due to the nature of virtual/remote internship particularly the traits for leadership and teamwork. Therefore, students obtained 0 or low score for these traits thus affecting the fairness of the assessment in overall. This proves that there is an assessment gap issue which therefore need to be a focus of study.

With the emerging opportunity and need for virtual internship program in future, based on the digital working era, there is a crucial need to revise and redesign the assessment rubric which can be used to assess virtual internship programs. Therefore, there is a need to evaluate the effectiveness of virtual internship programme to students and to recommendation for the creation of a rubric to assess the virtual internship program in the settings of the Malaysian Bachelor Accounting students.

5. CONCLUSION

Undergraduate accounting programmes are conceptualised as educational activities aimed at the integrated development of technical knowledge and workplace-related soft-skills. Following recommendations in the literature (Boyce, 2004), virtual internships are designed as immersive scenario-based learning environments that utilise proven strategies to achieve highly contextualised learning outcomes (Tacgın, 2020). This focus ensures that the strengths of traditional undergraduate accounting programmes are incorporated into a contemporary learning model that addresses the concerns of students and employers. This paper focuses on the possibilities to evaluate the effectiveness immersive assessment of designed virtual internship concerning learning, written report, attitude, and project for the different level learners or students, employer's perspective and lecturer's perspective this virtual internship was settled to teach stages becoming as professional accountant in the field.

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