

Accounting undergraduates' perception on internship program: Evidence from Tunisia

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Abstract

In recent years, many attempts have been undertaken to bridge the gap between the knowledge and skills acquired by accounting graduates and those expected by the labor market. As such, the internship program appears as a privileged link between academia and the professional environment. The aim of this paper is to investigate the advantages of the internship program for recent accounting graduates. To achieve this, a questionnaire was distributed to students enrolled in the third year of Bachelor's degree in Accounting Sciences in two Tunisian universities. The results have shown that the internship program significantly and positively impact the development of interpersonal and communication skills, and intellectual skills. In addition, the internship program significantly and positively impacts career development, also the same results have shown that the internship program has no significant effect on the development of knowledge acquired at university.

Key words: Advantages; Career development; Knowledge; Skills; Tunisia.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, internships have taken an increasingly important role in business education (Tackett *et al.*, 2001). In 1952, the American Accounting Association (AAA) recognized the benefits of internship program incorporated into the academic preparation of accountants (Schmutte, 1986). In 2007, the International Federation of Accountants (IFAC) issued the International Education Practice Statements (IEPS) 3: Practical Experience Requirements – Initial Professional Development for Professional Accountants, which highlight the importance of integrating practical experience into the training of accountants graduates to develop their professional knowledge and professional skills.

Studies concerning internship practices for undergraduate business, accounting and economics students are evidenced in many countries, including the USA, the UK and Malaysia Maelah, and al (2012) . In this context, several researchers indicated that the internship aims to bridge the gap between the academic world and the professional world (Nevett, 1985; Divine et al, 2007). Other researchers find that the internship provides a smooth transition from the academic environment to the professional environment (Garavan and Murphy, 2001). Internship program also provides students with the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge gained at university to a professional environment (Swindle and Bailey, 1984)

In the Tunisian context, the training of future accountants lasts six semesters. The last semester ends with an internship program. In fact, Article 8 of Decree No. 2008-3123 of September 22, 2008, lists that the training of bachelor's degree in Applied Accounting is designed to ensure the balance between practical and theoretical aspects. This article also emphasizes the necessity of internship in a professional body.

The objective of this paper is to examine the impact of internship program on professional skills development of accounting undergraduates. It should be noted that our study will focus on students enrolled on bachelor's degree in Applied Accounting. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: The second section focuses on the literature review. The subsequent sections present methodology, findings and discussions of the results. The last section concludes this research.

2. The review of literature

Searchers conducted by Maelah et al (2014) in the context of Malaysia, examine the benefits of the internship program from a questionnaire distributed to academics, professional accountants and students. The authors show that practical experience improves the knowledge acquired at the university. In the same groove, the study conducted by Knechel and Snowball (1987) compares the academic performance between two groups of accounting students: students with internship experience and students without internship experience. The study has revealed that students who participated in the internship program performed better than non-internship students in auditing course

Several researchers have been interested in studying the relationship between the internship program and the development of generic skills: in the United States (Albrecht and Sack, 2000); in Australia, in the United Kingdom (Gammie et al., 2002; Howison, 2003); and in South Africa (Barac, 2009; Stainbank, 2009). According to Maelah et al (2012), the internship program allows students to develop generic skills such as oral communication skills, group work and time management. A survey conducted among 137 accounting students from Kebangsaan University Malaysia (UKM) showed this result

In addition, Cord et al (2010), in the Australian context notes that students are able to develop their cognitive skills during the internship program. A questionnaire distributed to students enrolled at Wollongong University showed this result. Also, Britton and Tesser, (1982), indicate that the internship program offers students the opportunity to develop their intellectual skills such as analytical skills and problem-solving skills.

Md. Ali et al (2008) reveals that practical experience contributes to career development. This result appears from a questionnaire distributed to students who have completed their internship. These authors concluded that practical experience allows students to better understand their roles that they will be called upon to play.

3. Formulation of Hypothesis

From the above review of extant literature, it is clear that internship program brings benefits for recent accounting graduates. The following research hypothesis are addressed as follow:

H₁: The internship program is positively related to the development of intellectual skills of accounting undergraduates.

H₂: The internship program is positively related to develop interpersonal and communication skills of undergraduates accounting.

H₃: The internship program is positively related to improve knowledge acquired at university by undergraduates accounting.

H₄: The internship program is positively related to the career development of accounting undergraduates.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Data collection

The current study has been undertaken to examine undergraduates' perceptions on internship program. For that purpose, questionnaire was distributed to accounting students who have studied the last level in Bachelor of Accounting at two public universities and have completed their six-month internship program: 56 undergraduates accounting of the Faculty of Economics Sciences and Management of Tunis and 50 undergraduates of the Higher School of Economic and Commercial Sciences of Tunis. A total of 106 students were involved in the internship attachment for the academic session of 2015/2016. However, only 60 questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 57%.

4.2 Measurement of Variables

Our questionnaire consists of two parts. The first part addresses questions relating to the advantages of the internship program for undergraduates accountants. The second part allows us to collect demographic information from respondents. It should also be noted that measurement scale has been adopted in other research works. We have adopted "the career development" measurement scale of Mohd Jaffri Abu Bakar, (2011), which is widely used in previous research work by Khalil (2015), and Warinda (2013). In addition, we have retained "the knowledge" measurement scale of Crisostomo (2015). Thus, we used the measurement scale for the intellectual skills ,and interpersonal and communication skills from IES 3 (2014).

4.3 Methods of data analysis

In order to analyze the collected responses, we used several statistical analysis techniques. Firstly, we have performed a descriptive analysis of responses obtained in order to frame the characteristics of the surveyed population. Secondly, we have proceeded to principal component analysis and lastly, we used simple linear regression. Data from the questionnaires were analysed using spss version 21 for Windows.

5. Results

5.1 descriptive analysis

The table 1 provides that more than half of our sample, namely 60.4% of students are enrolled in the Faculty of Economics Sciences and Management of Tunis, and

39.6% of students are enrolled at the Higher School of Economics Sciences and Commercial of Tunis. Thus, it emerges from this table that the majority of undergraduates accounting are female, 67.9% of the students questioned are women while 32.1% of the students questioned are men. In addition, we find that 49.1% of students surveyed did their internship in accounting firms, 7.5% of the students surveyed did their internship in semi-public companies and 24.5% in public companies.

The table 2 shows that 56.7% of students think that the internship program is extremely important, and 20% of students think that the internship program is important. This result corroborates with research conducted by Paisey and Paisey (2010) who found that 64% of students believe that the opportunity to undertake an internship is "Extremely Important".

5.2 Regression analysis

Regression analysis shows that the internship program significantly and positively influences intellectual skills. The β value equal to (0, 438) and Student test (3.710) is much higher than the recommended threshold 1.96, significant at the 1% alpha level. This result confirms the hypothesis H_1 and it leads us to deduce that practical experience contributes significantly to improve the intellectual skills of accounting undergraduates.

Results also indicate that internship program significantly and positively influences the interpersonal and communication skills. The β value is equal to (0, 499), thus student test value is equal to (4.191) significant at the 1% level. It emerges from this result that practical experience provides the opportunity to accounting undergraduates to develop interpersonal and communication skills.

Results have revealed that internship program has no significant effect on the development of " knowledge " acquired at university. In fact, this result can be explained by the fact that host organizations give trainees lighter tasks, which prevents them to improve their knowledge

Moreover, internship program significantly and positively influences the career development. The β is equal to (0, 608). Thus the value of student's t test is equal to (5, 782) significant at the 1% level. This result clearly shows that the internship program contributes to career development for accounting undergraduates. It seems that practical experience allows students to gain insight about their future job and acquire an enriching practical experience which facilitates their professional integration.

6 Conclusion

In summary, this research provides insights regarding the benefits of internship program and competencies developed by the students during internship program from their perspective. A survey was administrated to students enrolled in an applied license in accounting sciences in two Tunisian universities. Data collected by the questionnaire we analysed using principal component analyzes and simple linear regression.

Our results show that the internship program significantly and positively influences the development of interpersonal and communication skills, and intellectual skills. In addition, the internship program significantly and positively influences career development. Also, results have revealed that the internship program has no significant effect on knowledge development acquired at university.

Like all researches, our study has a limit when it comes to providing samples: in fact we are limited at the two state universities whose total number students enrolled in applied license in accounting is 106 students. Use of a more representative sample would have improved the results of our research.

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Appendices

Table 1: Descriptive statistics.

| | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------------|-----------|---------------|
| University | | |
| FSEGT | 32 | 60,4% |
| ESSECT | 21 | 39,6 % |
| Gender | | |
| Male | 36 | 67,9% |
| Female | 17 | 32,1 % |
| Internship place | | |
| Accounting firm | 26 | 49,1% |
| Para public organization | 4 | 7,5% |
| Public organization | 13 | 24,5% |
| Other | 10 | 18 ,9% |

Table 2: Importance of internship program perceived by accounting undergraduates.

| | Percentage |
|----------------------|------------|
| Not at all important | 5% |
| Not important | 18,3% |
| Important | 20% |
| Extremely important | 56,7% |

Table 3: Simple linear regression.

| Indepedant variable | R ² | Fisher | P | T student | Beta |
|--|----------------|---------|--------|-----------|--------|
| Interpersonal and communication skills | 0,249 | 17,564 | 0,000 | 4,191 | 0 ,499 |
| Intellectual skills | 0,192 | 13,762 | 0,000 | 3,710 | 0 ,438 |
| career deelopmen | 0, 370 | 33 ,435 | 0,000 | 5 ,782 | 0 ,608 |
| Knowledge | 0,028 | 1,473 | 0 ,230 | 1,213 | 0,166 |