

DOWN THE ROAD TO “BAHRAIN 2030” INTERNSHIP PROGRAMS AND GRADUATES’ EMPLOYABILITY

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ABSTRACT: *This paper aims at identifying how the higher education internship programs affect meeting the demands of labor market in Bahrain and contribute to the employability of graduates. A designed survey was developed and distributed among a sample of the Bahraini higher education graduates, the analysis of which showed that the Internship Programs adopted by the different Bahraini higher education institutes contribute to meeting the demands of the labor market in Bahrain. Quantitative data was supported by qualitative information gathered through structured interviews with officials in charge of the internship programs in some of the higher education institutes to help explain the quantitative results. The study recommended the sustainment of the coordination and integration between the higher education from one side and the labor market from the other, to develop academic and internship programs that are compatible with the skills required by the labor market. Moreover, the study recommended a periodical evaluation for the higher education institutes to assure the provided internship programs are aligned with the labor market’s objectives and strategies, in addition to the contribution such programs have to the Kingdom’s development aimed by its 2030 vision.*

KEYWORDS: Internship Programs, Labor market, Higher Education, Graduate Attributes, Bahrain 2030 Vision.

INTRODUCTION

In today’s complicated and highly demanding labor market, internship programs of higher education institutes could play a key role in paving the way for a wider employability chance and a professional future for graduates due to the professional experience in a real life business environment gained by students.

The Kingdom of Bahrain has placed a great importance on developing a knowledge-based economy, with education being one of the cornerstones of Vision 2030. The long-term plan spearheaded by the Economic Development Board (EDB) that is guiding the economic future of the country. Unveiled in October 2008, the core objective of Vision 2030 is for Bahrain to develop "a productive, globally competitive economy, shaped by the government and driven by a pioneering private sector" diversified away from a dependency on energy.

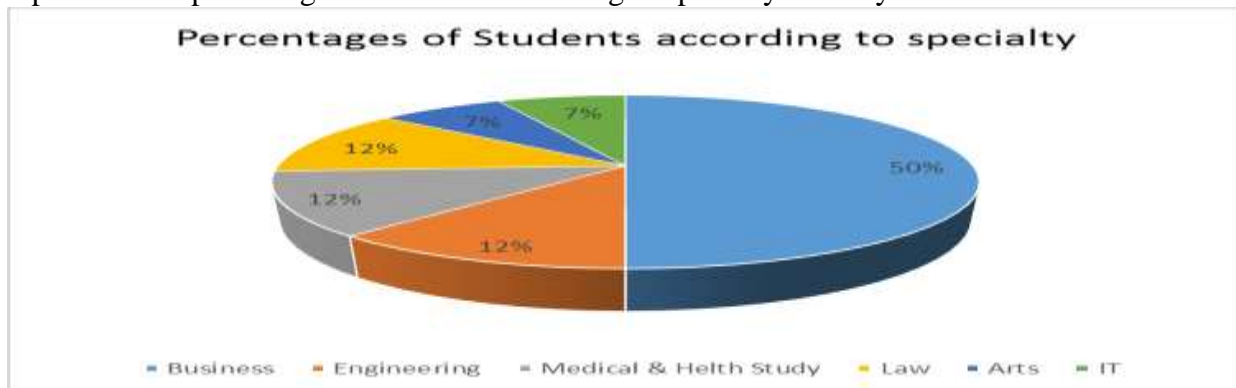
Bahrain has placed on top of its priorities for Vision 2030 developing a knowledge-based economy, with education being one of the cornerstones. As part of its link between Higher Education and the Labor market, Bahrain formed the National Coordinating Committee between Higher Education and Work & Industry Sector. Such committee is to tackle the responsibility of recommending the projects, studies, and suggestions necessary to fill up the gap between them. So

far, coordination was conducted with many sectors of the industry in Bahrain to reach a concept of the required graduate attributes specified for each sector, in order for HE institutes to prepare their graduates with the appropriate profession oriented knowledge, skills, and attributes.

As HE institutes are the source for such graduates, equipping them with professional skills to facilitate their future involvement in the labor market will remain a substantial challenge. Labor market is in persistent pursuit for attracting qualified and trained graduates who are able to get involved in business environment efficiently, and being exposed to such environment before graduation could be a preparation step for them to experience what they learn in class. Internship programs remain the main and effective method to qualify human resources for employees' tasks and missions of in all organizations, whether public or private (Saaedi 2003).

THEORETICAL REVIEW

The number of Higher Education institutes in Bahrain reached 14, 4 of them are public and 11 private ones. Total number of students in the academic year r2014/2015 (yearly HEC report) is 38,260 students, 33,398 of them are Bahraini and the rest are non- Bahraini. The following figure represents the percentages of students according to specialty of study:



2015 Bahraini HEC statistics report

“...there is a broad understanding of what qualities, characteristics, skills and knowledge constitute employability both in general, and specifically for graduates. Employers expect graduates to have technical and discipline competences from their degrees but require graduates also to demonstrate a range of broader skills and attributes that include team-working, communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem solving and managerial abilities” (Lowden et al, 2011).

Unlike what is believed by academics and labor market professional that employability entails a set of attributes and skills that employers usually prefer, (Pegg, et al., 2012) argue that there are some factors that play an important part and influence on the hiring process, and which are out of the applicant's control, namely gender and race, if we want to absorb the full picture.

There are many definitions of “employability.” Indeed, its components may differ widely between areas of work (Barber, L, and Bailey, S., 2014). When it comes to competencies, attitude, and

skills required in the business area, there had been always a tension between higher education institutes and industry sectors, no matter how they seem close to each other. Closing such gap requires a systematic approach by which graduates would not be astonished or surprised when they when they put their first step in the business world as professional, and here is the role of internship. Of course, university program leaders should always keep their finger on the pulse of changes in the field(s) their students hope to seek work in (Barber, L, and Bailey, S., 2014). They need to respond to the demands and requirements of the labor market.

(Rothwell et al., 2008: 2) defined graduate employability as “the perceived ability to attain sustainable employment appropriate to one’s qualification level”, and even the term was expanded by (McDonald, P., and Grant-Smith, D., 2015) to include full-time employment in a specific occupation or discipline. The term could be tracked back to Kanter (1995) who argued that workers would enhance their employment security through investing in new opportunities that contributed to the accumulation of human and social capital.

What thoroughly constitutes graduate employability varies across the literature. However, four core elements feature prominently (McDonald, P., and Grant-Smith, D., 2015). First, “disciplinary content knowledge and skills”, sometimes referred to as ‘hard skills’, are common across employability models (e.g., Bennett et al., 1999; Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Pool and Sewell, 2007; Yorke and Knight, 2004) which are acquired primarily through formal education and training. Second, “work experience”, which is considered an essential component of employability (e.g., Bennett et al., 1999; Pool and Sewell, 2007). Third, “soft or generic skills” are strongly emphasized in current employability frameworks, including such capacities as communication and enterprise skills, efficacy beliefs, self-confidence, self-awareness, self-reflection, meta-cognition and decision learning (Bennett et al., 1999; Pool and Sewell, 2007; Yorke and Knight, 2004) which are typically acquired through informal socialization processes in families, schools and through work experience, rather than via formal education. Fourth, employability is thought to require career enhancing capacities, including opportunity awareness, career decision making skills, and job searching and job getting skills, including resume writing, interview techniques and self-presentation competencies (Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Pool and Sewell, 2007).

Saying so, HE institutes could have their input in all of the four components to some extent, some in a direct way and others in an indirect one. Away from formal academic education, internship programs could play a vital role in preparing and equipping graduates with work experience skills, not to a professional level, but at least to a preliminary level that could put graduates on the beginning of his/her employability road.

Internship is a platform for students in the academic world to integrate theoretical knowledge with real working environments and put them into practice (Sahrir, M, and others 2016). By having internship programs, students can apply what they learn in class in real world situations. Hence, they need to participate in a well- planned and supervised programs that cope with their aspirations for the future (Muhamad et. al., 2009) and (Alexei et. al., 2013). By having such internship programs, the students will have practical skills that can boost their understanding of issues which are significant to a particular work (Hughes, 1998 & Furco, 1996) and enhance employability.

Thus, internship provides a unique opportunity for undergraduates to learn about the roles and tasks relevant to their fields of study (Sahrir, M, and others 2016). Furthermore, the need to conduct internship programs is a must for all students regardless of gender as indicated by several studies that there is no significant differences between genders who were undertaking internship trainings.

But supervision over internship programs necessitates a transformation in the perception of supervisors in their roles about the learning process based on the fact that it differs completely from the approach of the classroom (Barber, L., and Bailey, S., 2014). As (Chapman, McPhee, & Proudman, 1995) argued, the internship's educational process is based on the experiential model that integrates experiences from outside of the class environment with guided reflection and analysis from the instructor. In spite of the fact that some high education courses might have embedded experiential learning in some assignments such as volunteering experiences (Kretchmar, 2001; Raupp & Cohen, 1992), the structure of the internship courses is completely different as it is focused on the principles of experiential learning as they usually they are driven by the learner experience of the individual. And as was depicted in the model of (Kolb, 1984) model of internship learning, it has four phases of learning, concrete experience, observation and reflection, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Hence, internship supervisors should be aware of the components and direction of the learning process concerned, and to be aware as well that interns might differ from one another in their advancement and progress.

METHODOLOGY

To examine the effect of university internship programs in Bahrain on the employability chances of graduates, a practical study was conducted on the graduates of different Bahraini universities, public and private, to come up with findings that would shed the light on this area. This research used the descriptive analytical research approach through the use of a structured questionnaire, in addition to the interview technique to induce information from the targeted respondents.

To develop this questionnaire, the researchers reviewed available literature to expose common ground related to graduates' attributes and market labor demands. Then, a structured interview was developed and a questionnaire was designed to measure the different attributes gained through the internship programs and helped enhancing the employability chances.

Interview Technique

Considering the limited number of Higher Education institutes in Bahrain, which is 14 institutes in total, concerned interviews were conducted with 4 of individual in charge of the internship program, around 28% of the total population, to probe the strategies used in designing such programs and the technicalities of following up students in their first work experience, in addition to checking whether such institutes have some sort of alumni department to get information about the employability of graduates when they leave the institutes for good to begin their career life. A structured interview was designed, consisting of 10 questions, to be conducted with such individuals.

Interviews revealed that even though such institutes have a designed internship programs as part of the students' academic courses, most of them need some sort of update to cope with the recent changes occurred to the labor market. In addition, the follow up techniques used differ from one institute to the other, and they lacked cooperation and coordination with one another, which lead to different areas of concern when it comes to graduate attributes.

All of the interviewed personnel assured that they have a prerequisite number of credit hours students must achieve first before enrolling in the internship program to make sure they have solid ground of knowledge before putting such knowledge into action.

Even though such institutes possess ratios for their graduates' employability within the first year of graduation through their alumni offices, and even though they had some favorable ratios, they were reluctant in revealing such information.

Among the recommendations for enhancing the internship program, some of them recommended additional exposure for students, aside from the usual work they do in their training place, to include more seminars, workshops, and trade affairs.

Sample size

Due to the vast study population, represented in all graduates of Bahraini High Education Institutes who experienced the internship programs during their years of study, a sample of 120 graduates was chosen randomly to test the effect of the internship programs on the graduate attributes, and hence on their employability chances.

Apart from demographic variables, all others statement were measured using Likert type five point scale, where "strongly agree" was given the highest response "five" and "strongly disagree" was given the lowest response "one".

Data analysis Technique

Data was analyzed via the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS), to get such statistical tools such as means, simple regression, Pearson correlation, standard deviation, and Alpha Cronbach.

Reliability

As far as the reliability is concerned, *Cronbach's Alpha* Coefficient was used to prove the reliability of the survey, as is shown in the following table, and the value was 0.878 which is a high value as most researchers consider 0.60 as the minimum. This shows that the survey has an acceptable level of reliability:

Reliability Statistics	
Number of Statements Tested	Cronbach's Alpha
17	0,878

Tested Hypothesis

The hypothesized relation in the study was tested using the simple regression analysis with the help of Pearson Correlation Coefficient as follow:

H1: There is a significant effect of the high education institutes' internship programs and employability of graduates in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

1- Statistics and Discussion

The study population included all graduates of the Bahraini high education institutes in different sectors of the labor market. Sample was randomly chosen. 135 surveys were distributed, and total of the valid ones was 120 (88% response rate).

The sample was distributed as follows:

Table 1: Distribution of sample according to demographic variables

		Repetition	Percentage
<u>According to Nationality</u>	Bahraini	67	%55,8
	Non Bahraini	53	%44,2
<u>According to Gender</u>	Male	45	%37,5
	Female	75	%62,5
<u>According to Age</u>	>24	59	%49.2
	24-32	7	%5.8
	33-40	10	%8.3
	<40	44	%36.7
<u>According to Educational Level</u>	Bsc. / BA	59	%49.2
	High Diploma	6	%5
	Master	47	%39,2
	Doctorate	8	%6,6
<u>According to Work Sector</u>	Governmental	88	%73,3
	Private	32	%26,7
Total Sample		120	

* Kingdom of Bahrain is the destination of many expats working and living in the GCC with their families, and that is why we had to include non-Bahraini within the sample chosen.

Table 2: Simple Regression results identifying the overall value of internship programs on employability in Bahrain

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Degree of Freedom (DF)	Mean Squares (MS)	Correlation Coefficient R	Coefficient of Determination R²	F Ratio	Level of Significance at (F)
Regression	25.162	1	25.162	0,498	0,503	119.264	0.00
Residual Value	24.895	118	0,211				
Total	50.057	119					

From the above table, it is shown that there is a significant effect at significance level ($0.05 \leq$) of the internship programs as an independent variable on the employability of high education institutes' graduates as a dependent variable. Furthermore, we find that correlation coefficient R is 0.489, which leads to saying that there is a correlation relationship between both variable.

From the simple regression results, it was clear that there is an effect of the internship programs as an independent variable on the employability of high education institutes' graduates as a dependent variable. This can be demonstrated by the high value of calculated (F) where the significance was less than 0.00 which is lower than (0.01-0.05) and this is supported by the correlation coefficient that was (0,498) which indicates that internship programs influence the level of the employability of high education institutes' graduates by 50.3% and this is based on the coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0,503$).

Based on the findings, the hypothesis "There is a significant effect of the high education institutes' internship programs and employability of graduates in the Kingdom of Bahrain" was accepted.

Table 3: Means Interpretation Criteria

Description	Range
Strongly Reject	1.0- 1.79
Reject	1.80-2.59
Agree to some extent	2.6-3.40
Agree	3.41-4.20
Strongly Agree	4.21- 5.0

From the above table, it is shown that statements with low response rates 0-2.5 are calculated within the rejection area (strongly reject, reject), while statements with high response rates 2.6-5.0 are calculated within the agree area (agree to some extent, agree, strongly agree).

Table 4: Means and SD of Survey Statements

Ser.	Statement	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank	Mean Interpretation
1	I found a job directly after I graduated from college	1	5	3.42	1.33	16	Agree
2	I participated in an internship program during my college study	1	5	4.09	1.06	7	Agree
3	My participation in the internship program helped me find a job	1	5	3.82	1.34	11	Agree
4	My participation in the internship program was one of my work success factors	1	5	3.59	1.14	13	Agree
5	Skills I gained during the internship program were enough to enable me do my job	1	5	3.58	1.33	15	Agree

6	The internship program helped me do my job as a part of a team	1	5	3.13	1.36	17	Agree to some extent
7	I could manage a work team through the skills I gained through the internship program	1	5	3.69	1.20	12	Agree
8	The internship program helped me to understand and solve problems at my work	1	5	3.86	1.23	10	Agree
9	The experience I gained during the internship program helped me to develop and invent easier ways to do my job	1	5	4.17	1.11	5	Agree
10	Through the internship program, I gained enough experience to prioritize and plan my work	1	5	4.24	1.045	3	Strongly Agree
11	The internship program developed my business communication (English and Arabic)	1	5	4.21	0,96	4	Strongly Agree
12	I gained enough effective communication skills during the internship program	1	5	4.02	1.00	9	Agree
13	I gained enough report writing skills during the internship program	1	5	4.24	0,99	2	Strongly Agree
14	The internship program helped me gain marketing negotiation skills to do my job	1	5	3.58	1.25	14	Agree
15	The internship program helped me to accommodate with the work environment changes	2	5	4.10	0,86	6	Agree
16	The internship program helped me to abide with work ethics and manners	1	5	4.25	0,96	1	Strongly Agree
17	The internship program helped me to apprehend the institutional values and adapt with them	1	5	4.03	1.03	8	Agree
Total				3,88	0,90		Agree

From the above table, it is shown that statements 16 (The internship program helped me to abide with work ethics and manners), 13 (I gained enough report writing skills during the internship program), and 10 (Through the internship program, I gained enough experience to prioritize and plan my work) received the highest responses of all statements with mean values of 4.25, 4.24, and 4.24 and standard deviation values of 0.96, 0.99 and 1.24 in that order. While we find that statements 5 (Skills I gained during the internship program were enough to enable me do my job), 1 (I found a job directly after I graduated from college), and 6 (The internship program helped me do my job as a part of a team) received the lowest response of all statements with mean values of 3.58, 3.24 and 3.13 and standard deviation values of 1.33, 1.33, and 1.36 in that order.

Table 5: Analysis of survey statements' percentages and repetitions

Response	Repetition	Percentage
Strongly reject	11	9,43%
Reject	13	10.55%
Agree to some extent	26	21.66%
Agree	29	23.9%
Strongly Agree	41	34.43%
Total	120	100%

Table 6: Summary of Statistical Description of Survey Statements

Total Mean	Total SD	No. of Statements
3,88	0,90	17

From the above tables, it is shown that respondents agree to all survey statements. The Mean ranges between 3.13 and 4.25, which means the agreement on the effect of the Bahraini high education institutes' internship programs on the employability of graduates.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Equipping graduates with attributes and skills that are required in the labor market is one of the top priorities of the Bahraini educational system. Among the cornerstones to achieve this comes the internship programs prepared and organized by the Higher Education institutes that play a vital role in this arena.

Findings of this paper are compatible with those conducted in the same area in other societies. It combined both, structured interviews and a designed survey to provide qualitative information that supported the quantitative data analysis results.

Our main conclusions of the study includes that there is no doubt that the higher education institutes internship programs play a vital role in providing the graduate attributes and skills required by the labor market, and enhance the graduates' employability chances, provided that they are taken seriously by all parties concerned. But sustainability and periodical reviews of internship programs and labor market demands should be conducted on a regular basis to cope with each other. Students on the other side should be careful to make sure that their internship program goes in line with their aspirations and fields of interest.

Even though some graduates were not fully satisfied with their internship programs in enhancing their career life, here comes the role of officials in charge of such programs to make sure the bridge is constructed between the student's interests and aspiration on one side, and the choice of the suitable opportunity in the labor market on the other. Furthermore, they should develop clear and

effective policies and procedures to follow up how students are making use of the internship programs, and measure the results of such programs on a regular basis in the real world to make sure of any modifications required. In addition, they have to keep in mind that in the workplace, perhaps unlike the classroom, the student not the center of attention, which means that learning could be difficult, and they should warn students before the start of their internship programs about this fact, and provide them with the necessary methods and techniques to make as much use as possible of the relatively short period of internship, and encourage them to bring what they learn in the workplace to the class and the other way round, and work with them on a regular basis to overcome the obstacles they might encounter.

Even though the study had some limitations, such as the relatively small sample compared to the study population, in addition to its confinement to university graduates without inclusion of technical high schools and institutes, it still sheds the light on this important pillar of achieving Bahrain Vision 2030, and paves the way for other studies that would build on its results to include wider and more diversified population.

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