

## An Insight into Internship Program for Undergraduate Arabic Language Learners in Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

This study attempts to investigate the outcome of the internship training program in the Department of Arabic Language and Literature, at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). Methodologically, this study was conducted to gather the opinions and experience on the internship program among Arabic language and literature students. The participants were purposively selected from 57 out of 66 students who have completed their three months internship program either in the public or private sector from July to September 2015 by using an online survey and open-ended questionnaire. General findings from this study show that internship training has essentially improved their soft skills and increased their workplace literacy and well-being. Despite the poor perception of Arabic language in the mutual graduate employability as well as its practicality aspects and job market by the industry, Arabic language and literature students are well accepted in both private and public sectors to undertake their internship training as reported in this article. In conclusion, internship training is crucial, particularly among Arabic language and literature students as it enriches their experiences, knowledge and skills in both their personal and social life. It also increased their level of confidence to explore their future opportunity in the Malaysian job market including setting up their own businesses through entrepreneurship knowledge and skill.

**Keywords:** *Internship, Arabic language, soft skills, graduate employment, job market*

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## INTRODUCTION

Internship is a common course undertaken by undergraduate students in many universities around the world. Students are required to undergo the practical course as part of their academic degree requirement. Internship training for undergraduates provides opportunity in applying their academic knowledge and enhancing their soft skills as well as inculcating extra skills highly needed in the workplace after graduation.

Since internship plays an important role in preparing students for the real world especially employment and activities by imparting students with first hand skill development and knowledge not obtained during the regular classroom (Bisoux, 2007; Posner, 2008) it deserves further research. The formal learning environment will never be able to provide students with the complexities, problem analysis and problem solving opportunities involved in the real workplace (D'Abate et al., 2009). In Malaysia in particular, it has become crucial nowadays for most of the industry players to seek potential employees with experience ranging from 1-3 years. This will inadvertently put fresh graduates at a disadvantage. With the ever changing Malaysian economic landscape, Malaysian universities today are facing a tremendous challenge to prepare students with theoretical knowledge and the necessary practical skills, along with soft skills required by industry. At IIUM, industrial training or internship has been highly recommended to students in their final year of study at their respective kulliyah to enhance employment opportunities (Rohaiza et al., 2013).

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Internship is a platform for students to integrate theoretical knowledge with real working environments and put them into practice. It is important for them to apply theoretical knowledge previously acquired in the classroom setting (Idrus et al., 2010; Mohd Jaffri et al., 2011). As such, they need to take part in a supervised and planned work in the real-world specialized settings (Alexei et al; 2013; Muhamad et al., 2009). By undertaking this internship program, the students will gain practical skills that can boost their understanding of issues significant to a particular field of work (Furco, 1996; Hughes, 1998) and enhance employability, provide the students with real expectations of interns, furnish satisfaction of the internship experience and provide internship prerequisites as predictors of internship success (Knouse & Fontenot, 2008). Thus, internship provides a unique opportunity for undergraduates to learn about the roles and tasks relevant to their fields of study. Furthermore, the need to conduct internship programs is a must for all students regardless of gender. Several research studies indicated that there is no significant differences between genders who were undertaking this internship training (Mohd Jaffri et al., 2011; Muhamad et al., 2009; Warinda, 2013). It means that the internship is important for both male and female graduates. In the health professions education, an internship is conducted through integration of service learning as an increasingly important trend in health care services delivery shift from acute care to community-based settings (Cauley et. al. 2001).

In Malaysia, the dilemma facing graduates are manifold. Two of the most relevant to the present study is the lack of communication skills and proficiency in English. Employers require potential employees to have good communication skills (Harvey et al., 1997, 1999; York, 1999). Communication skills not only encompass the basics such as written and spoken capabilities but also the needs to establish good teamwork through networking besides being updated with the latest technology (Andrews & Higson, 2008). In the case of Malaysia, employability has always been associated with English language proficiency. Graduates from local universities have always been stereotyped as lacking in confidence, communication skills and proficiency (Wahiza, 2012). Other studies suggest poor mastery in English, difficulty in communication and interpersonal skills (Sirat et al., 2004; Pandian Abd Ghani, 2005).

At IIUM, language is also the strongest predictor of graduate employability especially with reference to the English language; graduate involvement in training programs offered by the university is also an important predictor apart from grade point average. Students also indicated the benefits of involvement in co-curricular activities for employability. In terms of students' satisfaction of academic programs, many are of the opinion that it was below par especially with regard to training (mean of 2.8 in 2005 and 3.0 for 2003 and 2004) (Graduate Employment in Asia, 2012). Hence, with regard to the present study, it is very important to investigate the effectiveness of the various internships held by the Department of Arabic and Literature.

Based on the IIUM Tracer Study 2013, among the first degree and postgraduate students, more than two-thirds of the first degree graduates (66.9%) and almost one-tenth of the postgraduates (7.9%) went for their industrial training even though it was not mandatory for postgraduates and some undergraduate academic programs. Arabic language and literature students are free to choose between academic writing and internship in their undergraduate study plan (Saodah, 2013). In general, all IIUM graduates reported that the university has a strong influence on their life. Among the items recording high perception among the Islamic Revealed Knowledge (IRK) students were: 'develop self-confidence' (89%), 'ability to be independent' (89.8%) and 'ready to face the working world and challenges' (88%) as mentioned by Aznan and Rohaiza (2013). Several studies reported some required qualities of graduates that need to be fulfilled as they are required by most of the employers in the job market such as self-management, personal qualities, teamwork skill and self-confidence (Abdul Hair et al, 2004; ACCI, 2002; Clarke, 1997; Turner, 2002).

### PROBLEM STATEMENT

The internship training program in the Department of Arabic Language and Literature at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) is conducted among the third and final year students for three months from June until September every year. The IIUM Tracer Study 2013 reported that almost three-fifths of the IIUM graduates (59.8%) completed their industrial training or internship in three months (Saodah, 2013). Based on Abdul-Karim (2009), internship periods vary from one institution to another and he concluded that an 8-month internship program is successful compared to other periods. The objectives of introducing internships are to develop students' ability to apply academic knowledge and theories at the workplace, develop soft skills and familiarize students with the actual workplace setting and experience.

In the department of Arabic Language and Literature, the aim is to make students relevant in the job market by exploring and connecting various partners and networks in the Malaysian industry and job market. Students are expected to be able to find job opportunities after graduation in the fields of education, translation, mass media, entrepreneurship, and many more. Furthermore, the new policy of the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia requires public universities to prepare graduates to be job creators and not limit them to job seekers only. This training program is also part and parcel of the department's responsibility to furnish students who can face the real workplace experience once they have completed their university studies.

However, reports for the Arabic language and literature students are not easily accessible because they are mixed with other reports (such as Quran Sunnah etc.) in the Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge (IRK) based on the IIUM Tracer Study 2013. In terms of employment status for Islamic Revealed Knowledge (IRK) first degree graduates in 2013, 36.6% of them were employed full-time, 18.8% were employed part-time, 28.9% were unemployed and 16.5% were of unknown status (Mariam Adawiyah & Mohd Yazid, 2013). This suggests a need for enhancing the students' employability by imparting more internship and industrial training program experience to make them well-prepared for the job market as emphasized by several researchers such as Clarke (1997), Turner (2002) and Abdul Hair et al. (2004).

### RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research objectives of the study are as the following:

- 1- To investigate the learner's satisfaction in enhancing their knowledge and soft skills in the job market and real workplace.
- 2- To explore the learner's feedback in enhancing their knowledge and soft skills at the workplace.
- 3- To gather the learner's comments and suggestions in improving the internship program in an academic department.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURE

A mixed method survey was employed to collect data for this study. The respondents for this study were purposively selected from 57 out of 66 interns who have completed their three-month internship program from July until September 2015 in various public or private sector organizations throughout Malaysia. Based on Krejcie and Morgan (1970), the required sample size is acceptable if the total population is 65 students. An adapted questionnaire by Nurazzura, Khairulanuar, Sohela, and Noor Syafika (2014) was used to measure the interns' self-assessment of their knowledge and skills after the internship training program in order to investigate their workplace knowledge and experiences. No reliability test was conducted on the survey questionnaire since it had been used in a previous study involving 100 undergraduate interns at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, KIRKHS, IIUM.

The adapted questionnaire with a very slight change was sent through an online link through a WhatsApp group application and also posted in a Facebook social media group page. The survey contained four parts: demographic background, satisfaction level of interns in the internship program and interns' overall comments and suggestions for future improvement of the internship program among Arabic Language and Literature students. For part two, a 5-point Likert-like scale was used to measure the interns' responses with 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. All descriptive data were analyzed using the Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software while the open-ended responses were reported in the thematic table after the comments or suggestions by students were analyzed and concluded accordingly.

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The results and findings are reported in three main categories which are demographic background, satisfaction level of interns in the internship program and overall comments/suggestions on internship program among Arabic Language and Literature students towards employability opportunity in Malaysian job market for future improvement. The details are as shown in the following:

### a) Demographic Background

#### 1- Gender:

Table 1: *Gender*

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	5	8.8
Female	51	89.5
Missing	1	1.8
TOTAL	57	100

Table 2: *Year of Study*

Year	Frequency	Percentage
3 <sup>rd</sup> year	8	14.0
4 <sup>th</sup> year	48	84.2
Missing	1	1.8
TOTAL	57	100

As shown in Table 1, the majority of respondents are female (89.5%) while the rests are male undergraduate students (8.8%) with 1.8% unknown. Table 2 shows that the final year students formed the highest percentage of participants in the internship training program (84.2%), while the rest are still in the 3rd year of their studies (14%). In terms of nationality of interns, almost all of internship trainees are Malaysians (96.5%), while only 2 are non-Malaysians (3.5%).

## 2- Place of Internship:

Table 3 presents the distribution of internship places which have been selected by the trainees during June until September 2015.

*Table 3: Place or Nature of Internship*

<b>Place/Nature of Training</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
School/college/education	25	43.9
Editor/proof-reader/book/magazine industry	8	14.0
Translator	11	19.3
Tourist guide/ hotel/service	1	1.8
Business/customer service/entrepreneur	1	1.8
Magazine/newspaper/broadcasting.	6	10.5
Others	3	5.4
Missing	2	3.6
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>100</b>

From Table 3 it is very obvious that most of them were involved in education (43.9%), book industries (24.5) and translation (19.3%) and others (12.3%).

**b) Satisfaction level of interns in the internship program:**

Table 4 displays the results for satisfaction level of interns regarding the internship program.

*Table 4: Learner's Satisfaction of Internship Programme in Improving Employability Skill*

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
a) Capable in applying theoretical and instrumental knowledge.	3.75	Moderate High
b) Believed that academic study and work place expectations differ hugely.	3.93	Moderate High
c) Believed that every organization has a position for them.	3.93	Moderate High
d) Believed that internship program prepared them for job market.	4.21	High
e) Socially comfortable in communicating with anyone.	3.98	Moderate High
f) Analyzed information before making decision.	3.93	Moderate High
g) Believed in teamwork.	4.32	High
h) Acknowledged and recognized colleagues' abilities.	4.16	High
i) Believed that their knowledge (Arabic) can be applicable in workplace.	3.95	Moderate High
j) Need for extra knowledge and skills for employment in the job market.	4.04	High
k) Believed that academic learning helped them in internship period.	3.91	Moderate High
l) Comfortable at their workplace.	4.04	High
m) Became more disciplined in time management.	4.12	High
n) Overcame Arabic language communication skill through this program.	3.67	Moderate High
o) Still in need of English during internship program	3.65	Moderate High
p) Believed that academic assignments are relevant.	3.33	Moderate High
q) Agreed that internship has prepared them for the public sector only.	2.75	Moderate Low
r) Agreed that internship has prepared them for the private or non-profit sector only.	2.86	Moderate Low
s) Agreed that internship has prepared them for both public and private or non-profit sectors.	3.96	Moderate High
t) Gained experience to set up their own business in the future.	3.74	Moderate High

The interpretation of the previous mean scores was done based on categorization of interpretation as shown in the following Table 5.

*Table 5: Categorization of interpretation*

<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
4.1– 5.0	High
3.1– 4.0	Moderate High
2.1– 3.0	Moderate Low
1.0 - 2.0	Low

Adapted from Zawawi (2008) and Norasikin (2009).

Based on the survey findings in Table 4 and the interpretation in Table 5, six (6) items were reported to have high interpretation of mean scores which are related to students' good perception towards internship program preparing them for job market, improving their knowledge and teamwork, enhancing their soft skills, becoming more confident and disciplined personality, preparing them well for both public and private or non-profit sectors as well as gaining experience to set up their own business in the future. Only two items show the moderate low interpretation of mean scores; the interns do not agree that internship training has prepared them for the public sector only, and they disagree that internship prepared them for the private/non-profit sector only. Hence it can be concluded that the interns agree internship training is good in preparing them for the job market in both public or private sectors (including non-profit sector).

### c) Qualitative findings

The respondents were also asked to give their comments and suggestions in an open-ended questionnaire with regards to the internship program among Arabic Language and Literature students towards employability opportunity in Malaysian job market for improvement in the future. The feedback is as important as the descriptive results and findings due to its in-depth responses and explanation by the respondents. They are analyzed and grouped accordingly based on specific themes as shown in Table 6:

Table 6: Qualitative Analysis

Main Theme	Comments and suggestions
a) Skill Practicing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good for student to practise their skills.</li> <li>• Enhance knowledge and skills</li> </ul>
b) Soft skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide communication and computer skills in academic programs before internship training</li> <li>• Furnish students with more computer literacy and skills</li> <li>• Need for extra skills such as communication, writing news report, customer service among students</li> </ul>
c) Prior knowledge and preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student must take the course of Arabic for occupational purpose before internship program</li> <li>• Expose the students more to Arabic writing training</li> </ul>
d) Program support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need to find financial support during internship training</li> <li>• Adding academic courses related to speaking skills such as public speaking, debate, acting etc.</li> </ul>
e) Management of internship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make it longer during normal semester</li> <li>• Improve the observation procedures of internship training</li> <li>• Visit to internship place by every appointed supervisor</li> <li>• Need to review academic courses related to writing skill</li> <li>• Improve the selection of internship places by the department</li> </ul>

The comments and suggestion from the open-ended questionnaire indicated the positive and negative responses among learners on internship program for Arabic Language and Literature students towards employability opportunity in the Malaysian job market. The responses are concluded in the main themes of practicality, needed skills, prior knowledge, support and management of internship.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study reveals the importance of conducting the internship program among undergraduate learners as part and parcel of learning components before their graduation. This is crucial for preparing and empowering them with the required knowledge and skills especially in improving self-confidence, ability to be independent and readiness to face the working world and challenges as mentioned before by Aznan and Rohaiza (2013). Apart from that, it may improve communication skills and also the needs to establish good teamwork through networking as well as the use of technology such as computer skills (Andrews & Higson, 2008).

Based on the findings, the Arabic learners show very positive perceptions in several related items such as 'that internship program prepared them for job market' (mean 4.21), 'believed in teamwork' (mean 4.32), and 'acknowledged and recognized colleagues' abilities' (mean 4.16). They were also very comfortable at their workplace (mean 4.04) and became more disciplined in time management (mean 4.32). In general, the learners believed that the internship program has improved important skills and competencies such as language and communication, soft skills and confidence level through experience gained during a 3-month training program. This internship has also prepared them for both public and private or non-profit sectors (mean 3.96). In

addition, the interns did also mention various positive aspects of the program with some suggestions for improvement mainly for the managerial procedures.

## CONCLUSION

This article reports on the evaluation of an internship training program among undergraduate learners conducted among Arabic language and literature students in 2015. Although the overall findings show positive feedback among learners with regard to improved soft skills and increased workplace literacy and well-being, the academic department as well the Kulliyah and IIUM should be aware of suggestions for improvement as mentioned by the learners. Implementing these suggestions will help ensure effectiveness of future internship programs among Arabic language and literature undergraduate students.

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