Ethics education for internship and career development: A pilot study for constructing an ethics training framework

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Abstract

The impact of internship on students' development has been capturing scholars' attention in recent years. The importance of ethics justifies more attention on ethics training for internship and career development. This pilot study aims to achieve two objectives: (i) to understand students' perception on the need of ethics training for internship or students' readiness for entering workplace settings; and (ii) to collect students' input on pedagogy for establishing a framework of ethics training module for internship. Semi-structured interview approach (Streubert & Carpenter, 1995) was adopted in this pilot study. Three tertiary students were invited to participate voluntarily in semi-structured individual interviews with the aid of a questionnaire that covered several aspects of ethical training materials including personal attitudes, interpersonal communication, internship responsibilities, regulations of the respective industry and the host company/college's support to interns. Results of this pilot study show three findings. First, participants indicated relatively higher training need on internship responsibilities and regulations of respective industry or workplace. Second, participants have mixed views on the training needs in the areas of personal attitudes and interpersonal communication. Third, some evidences suggest that there is a need on using interactive approach for ethics training. This pilot study suggests further studies and evaluation for establishing an ethics training framework that comprises four main training aspects: attitudes, interpersonal communication, responsibilities and relevant regulations.

Keywords: Ethics training framework, internship, career development

Literature Review

Several studies have been done to study the effects of internship (see for examples, Gault, Leach and Duey, 2010; Maelah, Muhammaddun, Ramli & Aman, 2014). Gault *et al.* (2010) studied the relationship between internship participation and students' employment. Their study confirmed the value of internship experience on the students' employment marketability. Maelah *et al.* (2014) examined the effectiveness of internship from perspectives of students, university and employers. Maelah *et al.* (2014)

reported some evidences that internship may help develop students' soft skills such as working in group, meeting deadlines, communication skills, problem solving skills, coping with stress and ability to general practical ideas though different mean scores were reported by three types of stakeholders. Holyoak (2013) explored the factors that affect the effectiveness of the internship. Holyoak (2013) mentioned that the effectiveness of internship may depend on intern's predisposition for learning and supervisor's willingness to support learning.   High level in both intern's predisposition for learning and supervisor's willingness to support learning may lead to optimal conditions for development from internship experience. In contrary, low level in intern's predisposition for learning and supervisor's willingness to support learning will lead to mutual dissatisfaction on the internship (Holyoak, 2013).

Another realm of studies covered discussion on students' readiness for entering internship or workplace settings (Gysbers, 2013; Jackling and Natoli, 2015; Kim, Kim & Bzullak, 2012).   According to Jackling and Natoli (2015), 40% of the internship providers respondents indicated that interns failed to show they are "work ready" in the aspects of handling unfamiliar problems and communication skills. Gysbers (2013) discussed the meaning of "Career Ready". One way to interpret career readiness is about how students equip the knowledge, skills, and interpersonal relationship skills for engaging in different settings in workplace. The paper also discussed how school counselling programs and a whole school-community approach help students become career ready. Gysbers (2013) suggested that "Personal and Social Development", "Academic Development", and "Career Development" constitute the three domains of the strengths-based content of school counselling programs. Kim *et al.* (2012) had done a survey of internship programs for management undergraduates.   They found that there were different requirements for students to enroll in internship course.   Requirements included no restrictions, permissions from internship supervisor or department chair, permission with school standing (e.g. sophomore, junior, senior, etc), or taken specific courses as prerequisite. To summarize, this stream of literature pointed out the importance of the preparation work for helping students to be more "career-ready" for entering workplace or internship arrangement.

Ethics and attitudes content are commonly found in education and workplace related literature (see for examples, Archer & Davison, 2008; Maelah *et al*., 2014; Maertz, Stoeberl & Marks*,* 2014; McMurray, Dutton, McQuaid & Richard*,* 2016; Nolan, Conway, Farrell & Monks*,* 2010).   Archer and Davison (2008) studied graduate employability from employers' perspectives. Archer and Davison (2008) indicated that integrity and character/personality are two of the top ten most important skills and capabilities when employers recruit new graduates. McMurray *et al*. (2016) also investigated on employer demands for

business skills when recruiting graduates. McMurray *at al.* (2016) commented that personal attitude and trustworthiness are respectively among the most important factors and the most important transferable skills to employers when recruiting graduates. Maertz *et al.* (2014) discussed potential costs and benefits from perspectives of interns, employers and schools, and this study provided more understanding and insights for developing successful internships. The study by Maertz *et al.* (2014) covered several factors and aspects in the discussion including interns' dependability, professionalism, legal obligations of employing organizations and information about equal employment opportunities. Sipe, Johnson & Fisher (2009) also suggested that students should attend more training as to avoid or minimize gender discrimination or harassment in the workplace. These studies support the need for more studies on ethics training for internship and career development.

Among the literature on employability, a stream of literature investigates graduate competency with industry-specific focus. Nolan *et al.* (2010) investigated the competency needs for hotel industry in Irish, and their discussion covered different areas including ethical standards, honesty, teamwork ethic, actions related to environmental issues and understanding on relevant legislations. Maelah *et al.* (2014) focused on internship in the accounting field, and evaluated several internship programme outcomes including professional ethics and social responsibilities. To conclude, ethics and attitudes have been noted in different extent in the existing literature. However, many existing studies adopted broad approaches reflecting on a wide range of competency elements instead of focusing on ethics elements. The importance of ethics justifies more attention on ethics training for internship or career development.

Objectives and Methodology

In view of the importance of ethics and attitudes related aspects, this paper aims to provide more understanding on students' perceptions on ethics training which may help to fill in the gap of the existing ethics training materials. This pilot paper aims to achieve the following two objectives:

(i) To understand students' perception on the need of ethics training for internship or students' readiness for entering workplace settings;

(ii) To collect students' input on pedagogy for establishing an ethics training framework.

Semi-structured interview approach (Streubert & Carpenter, 1995) was adopted in this pilot Study to explore the above objectives. Three tertiary students were invited to participate voluntarily in semi-structured individual interviews with the aid of a questionnaire. For the purpose of pilot study,

participants studying in tertiary education were selected as tertiary students constitute a major sector for internship. Besides, the participants should cover perspectives from at least two different programmes, and come from at least two different stages of study. Hence, the invited participants consist of students from two different business programmes, studying at stage-1 or stage-2 of their programmes. To solicit views from participants with different length of time of previous work experience, two of the three participants have some work experience (more than 2 months) and one participant has less work experience (less than 2 months). The confidentiality issues and the nature of the research were explained to the participants.

Based on literature review (for examples, Archer & Davison, 2008; Maelah *et al.,* 2014; Maertz *et al*., 2014; McMurray *et al*., 2016; Nolan *et al.,* 2010), ethics training materials may relate to a wide range of elements. A preliminary grouping was conducted after literature review, and it was found that several ethical elements can be grouped into four main broad dimensions including personal attitudes, interpersonal communication, internship responsibilities, regulation of the respective industry or workplace. The semi-structured individual interviews consist of two main parts. In the first part, interviewees were invited to rate from their perceptions on the training needs on the above mentioned dimensions based on a 9-point scale (with point "9" as the highest level of training need). In the second part, interviewees were asked to further elaborate or explain their answers, and share their views on issues related to internship training and ethics training approach.

Findings

Results of this pilot study show three findings. First, students indicated relatively higher training need on internship responsibilities as well as rules and regulations of respective industry or workplace. As interns or fresh graduates in general have less prior work experience and exposure, they may not be fully aware of the impact of their decisions or actions on different stakeholders such as customers, host company or even the community. Besides, there are different regulations and respective laws for different industries. For example, interns or graduates entering finance sector may need to know more about the content of "insider trade", and similarly there are codes of practices respectively for health sector, engineering and other sectors.   Based on the pilot interviews, "uncertainty" in the workplace as mentioned by one of the respondents, may be one of the reasons for explaining the higher training needs from student perception. Training on these aspects may enable students to obtain more concepts about the practical aspects of the relevant industry.

Second, students have mixed views on the training needs in the areas of personal attitudes and interpersonal communication. It was observed that students with more work experience (e.g. summer or part time jobs with more than 2 months) reported relatively lower training needs on the aspects of personal attitudes and interpersonal communication, as compared with the training needs on internship responsibilities, rules and regulations of relevant industry. Based on the interviewees' responses, there are several possible rationales for explaining the mixed views on personal attitudes and interpersonal communication. One of the interviewees stated that students can learn personal attitudes and interpersonal communication skills through other training opportunities. Hence, some students may not express very strong scores for the additional ethics training needs specifically on these dimensions. Besides, as explained by an interviewee in the second part of the semi-structural interview, it may be difficult to change one's attitudes through an ethics training programme using traditional training approach such as one-way lecture or career talk. In other words, students' perception on training needs may relate to their perception on the effectiveness of ethics training methodology. This observation justifies further study on the pedagogy for ethics training.

Third, this study provides evidences that there is a need for using interactive approach for ethics training. Different learning approaches have been mentioned in existing articles (see for examples, Schrier, 2015, Wouters, van Nimwegen, van Oostendorp, and van der Spek, 2013, Wong and Chan, 2017). In this study, students were asked to comment on different training approaches including lecturing, points of reminders, cases (or simulated examples) for discussion, other learning activities and reading materials. Interviewees indicated preference on the use of interactive approach to learn ethics. One respondent explained that students may have higher involvement through participation in cases discussions (or simulated examples) and interactive approach such as role play and scenario settings. However, using interactive approach may cause time constraints on the training programme, especially if there are lots of training materials to be covered in the programme. It is expected that interactive approach needs longer time for students to experience or reflect on only a few learning points in a training activity. To echo with the need to balance the time factor and the effectiveness of the training methodology, some interviewees also shared that there may be a need to use a combination of interactive approach and other traditional approaches (e.g. lecturing, cases for discussion, notes of reminders, reading materials), depending on the intended training outcomes and the nature of the content.

Discussions and Conclusion

This pilot study provided several reference points for further research on the topic. First, the preliminary findings and observations are useful for determining the scope for further studies. As ethics training for internship and career development has broad boundary in the knowledge, literature reviews and individual interviews provided more understanding on some key ethics training elements for constructing dimensions of ethics training framework. This study proposes a preliminary ethics training framework (acronym as A.I.R. Codes framework) that comprises four main training aspects, including (i). attitudes, (ii). interpersonal communication and relationship, (iii). responsibilities to stakeholders, and (iv). codes and relevant regulations. Second, it was observed that students' perceptions on ethics training needs also relate to the methodology of ethics training. Hence, this study suggests for further thoughts on the pedagogy of ethics training for internship and career development. In view of the limited responses collected in this study, more studies and evaluations need to be conducted for constructing an ethics training framework. Future research can be conducted to enhance more understanding on the topic such as comparison of students' perceptions across different disciplines, comparison of interns and fresh graduates' perspectives and perspectives from other stakeholders.

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