Does an internship in Business Administration enhance professional competences?

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was twofold. First, we want to determine which competences are acquired through an internship, as well as the levels of attainment. Secondly, we want to compare the levels of achievement in two different universities, since we are interested in proving whether the university of origin affects the final results. We thus organized competences following the classification made by the Tuning project, which groups them as instrumental, interpersonal and professional. A questionnaire was distributed among the students participating in internships, and the firms offering them in each university, to assess their perceptions of the competences.

We used the SPSS statistical package to conduct a set of mean tests to identify differences between the perceptions of the students and firms. Students acquire a higher level of professional competences than instrumental or interpersonal competences. There are also differences according to university, which suggests its importance.

KEYWORDS

1. Introduction

In recent years, many universities have started to offer internship opportunities to their students. Although internships can be conducted as a curricular or an extracurricular activity, studies have shown that the majority of colleges offer internships as a component of their academic program (Hergert, 2009). Knouse and Fontenot (2008), undertook a research review of the benefits of internships, and concluded that their main benefits are: (a) enhancing employability, as they can help students find jobs or an internship can be directly translated into a full-time job (b) creating real work experiences for students, which motivate them to continue along a career path, and (c) creating realistic expectations about the real business world and helping to clarify a student's career intentions. Although all these benefits are obtained from an internship experience, Milne and Caldicott (2016) note that many universities basically incorporate internships (work integrated learning) to fulfil their mission of providing graduates who are ready for work within industry.

Evaluating and assessing internship activities is considered important in order to improve university business programs (Beard, 2007). Internship programs often consider the opinions and evaluations of employers in assessing student performance, as employers are the best judges of professional competences (Milne and Caldicott, 2016). The combined assessment of the learning experience by the student, the company employer, and the academic supervisor can be an integral part of the overall program evaluation (Beard, 2007).

The interaction and evaluations of students, employers, and university faculty members provide information about student traits, knowledge, skills, and behavior, as well as perspectives on coursework activities, and can even suggest curriculum changes. These outcomes are priceless and can help both future students and professionals (Beard, 2007). After analyzing the importance of the evaluations and interactions between a student and their employer, this paper compares the skills and knowledge acquired after an internship program from both sides (student and employer) in two different universities.

2. Sample and Methodology

This study analyses the skills and competences acquired by students on a Bachelor's Degree program in Business Administration after their internship placement. The

evaluated students were enrolled at two different universities in Barcelona, Spain, and for privacy reasons, the universities have been called University X, and University Y. All the students were evaluated by their employers at the end of the internship period, and each student also had to fill in a self-assessment questionnaire.

The sample for this study included the answers of 81 students and 210 tutors who had participated in internships at University Y, and of 118 students and 118 tutors who had participated in internships at University X. In total, the sample comprises 527 individuals: 199 students and 328 tutors.

The first step was to compare the questionnaires from both universities and the competences analyzed. The competences were named differently and classified under different areas at each university, and so an initial analysis was conducted to classify each competence and determine which were comparable.

After studying the different competences and skills in the questionnaire, three different areas were created, following the widely accepted Tuning project: (1) Professional Competences, (2) Instrumental Competences, and (3) Interpersonal Competences. This taxonomy meets the objective of including the spectrum of abilities needed throughout working life, without establishing any kind of hierarchy among them (Pagani, 2009). The project was intended to address and realize several of the Bolonia action lines, and involved some 100 institutions, including the European University Association (EUA) and the national Conferences of Rectors (González and Wagenaar, 2003, 2005).

Table 1 shows which competences and skills were classified under each of these areas. The other skills and competences in the questionnaires were not considered for this study due to impossibility of comparison between universities.

University X	University Y
Professional Competences	
• They show willingness to learn and make efforts to work well	• Learning ability
• They strive to understand the company and the sector	• Degree of knowledge of the internal dimensions of the company or other organizations
	• Degree of knowledge of agents and the economic, legal, political, sociological environment

	• Ability to value the internationalization strategies of the company or other organizations
• They demonstrate initiative in their work	• Initiative and entrepreneurship
• They are motivated in their work	• Self-sufficiency and motivation for success
Instrumental Competences	
• They are effective in solving problems and dealing with incidents	• Problem solving
• They know how to plan and prioritize their work	• Organization and planning capacity
• They show self-confidence and autonomy in the development of their functions	• Capacity to work autonomously
• They are able to correctly use the new technological resources	• Computer skills
• They are able to apply theoretical knowledge in their job	• Ability to apply knowledge to practice
Interpersonal Competences	
• They are a good team player and perform the part of the work that is assigned to them	• Ability to work as a team
• They communicate in a concrete/precise and clear way	• Oral communication in Catalan and/or Spanish
	• Ability to transmit knowledge

Table 1. Equivalent Competences for Comparison Purposes.

The next step was to homogenize the data obtained from the questionnaires. The questionnaires were classified into four groups: (1) University X Student Self-Evaluations, (2) University Y Student Self-Evaluations, (3) University X Employer Evaluations, and (4) University Y Employer Evaluations.

The questionnaires from University X consisted of statements that had to be rated by each student/employer using a scale from 1 to 4, with 1 being the lowest value and 4 the highest (excellent). The questionnaires from University Y had to be rated on a scale from 1 to 10, however, with 1 being the lowest (worst) value and 10 the highest. In order to compare all data, the answers from University Y were converted to a 1 to 4 scale. It is important to remember that this difference in scales may have introduced bias into the analysis.

After eliminating the questionnaires that were not completed correctly or included blank answers, we finished with 74 valid questionnaires for the University X Student Self-

Evaluations, 76 valid questionnaires for the University Y Student Self-Evaluations, 71 valid questionnaires for the University X Employer Evaluations, and 198 valid questionnaires for the University Y Employer Evaluations.

3. Results

The t-test was used (via SPSS software) to search for significant differences between means. This was first in order to compare the student self-assessments between the two universities for each set of competences. Secondly it was used to assess the existence of differences between students from both universities, according to the assessment made by the employer. Again the three sets of competences were tested. In each case Levene's test was conducted to identify invariance and an associated t-value was found.

3.1. Student self-evaluations

Figure 1 shows the means obtained from the student self-evaluations, grouped according to the different competence areas. Interpersonal Competences were aspects related to teamwork and proper communication. The Instrumental Competences included topics like problem solving, prioritization and work organization, the appropriate use of technological resources and the application of theoretical knowledge to real case scenarios, and the set of Professional Competences included aspects related to motivation and initiative at work, as well as aspects related to effort and willingness to learn about the company and its sector or industry.

Students from University X rated themselves significantly higher than students from University Y. Although there is little difference (Table 2) between Instrumental and Interpersonal Competences (0.34 and 0.31 respectively), it is interesting to notice that the difference for professional competences jumps to 0.82.
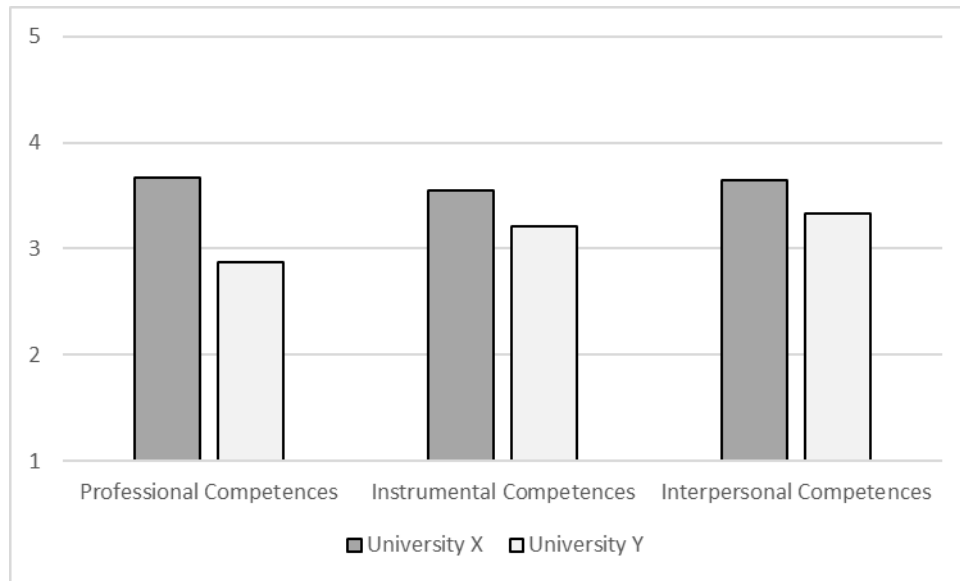
Figure 1. Student Self-evaluation Means.

	University X	University Y	Differences	t-test
Professional Competences	3.67	2.84	0.82	9.13
Instrumental Competences	3.56	3.21	0.34	4.31
Interpersonal Competences	3.64	3.33	0.31	4.14

Table 2. Differences Between Student Self-Evaluations.

3.2. Employer self-evaluations

Figure 2 shows the average results when comparing the employer self-evaluations for each student. Table 3 summarizes the significance level of the differences. Again, those companies with interns studying at University X, rated the student competences with higher values than those from University Y. The differences follow a similar pattern to that obtained in the analysis of the student self-evaluations, however, in this case, the discrepancies for Instrumental and Interpersonal Competences increased to 0.49 and 0.46 respectively. Professional Competences is again the area with the greatest gap (0.78 points).
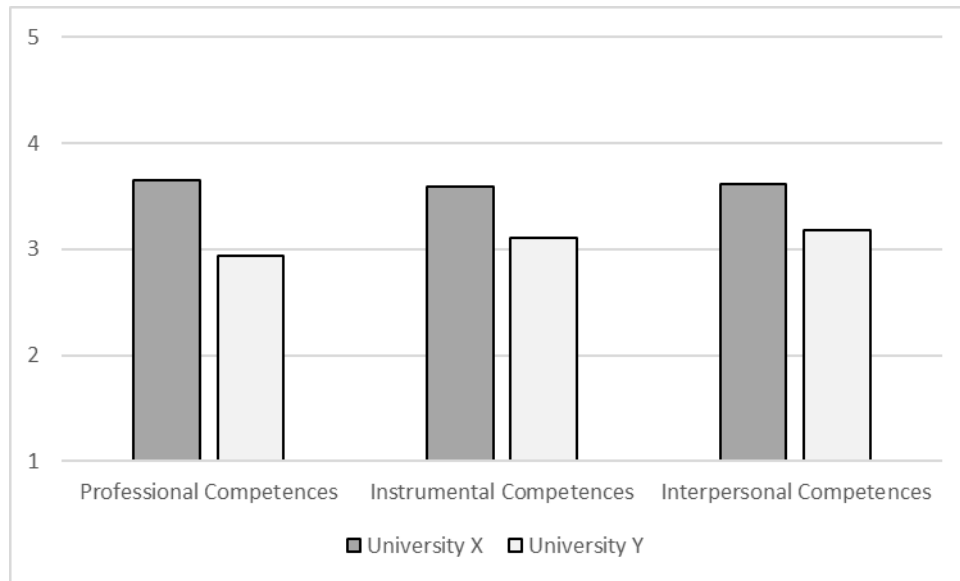
Figure 2. Employer Self-evaluations Means.

	University X	University Y	Differences	t-test
Professional Competences	3.68	2.90	0.78	7.73
Instrumental Competences	3.61	3.12	0.49	5.37
Interpersonal Competences	3.66	3.19	0.46	5.08

Table 3. Differences Between Employer Self-evaluations.

4. Discussion

4.1. Description of the structure

There were some differences in the structures that support the work placement programs in the universities. University X referred to only one faculty (Business and Economics) and the students were managed by this faculty, while those at University Y referred to several faculties and students were managed by a central office, although most of the trainees belonged to the Business and Economics faculty. The first difference, then, involved the volume of managed internships, where University Y had more than University X (also due to the difference in the size and the age of both universities). A first bias may thus be related to the volume of students and tutors involved. Smaller numbers can favor more personalized attention between students and tutors.

Such personalization can be seen in the program that University X has for its future graduates, which includes six sessions with students, in which they are given training in how to write their CVs, a mentoring session is held, and there is then an individualized

meeting about their preferences and to provide advice. There is also a simulation session on how to pass a personal interview, and another with instructions on how to manage a professional career in the short and medium term. Finally, a session on personal skills in professional practice is offered. University Y offers a wide range of courses and training sessions for students who are finishing their studies. They are managed from a centralized office by technicians with extensive experience in the entrance of students into the labor market. The various faculties thus hold workshops for the development of professional competences (personal branding, communication skills, assessment center etc.) are also held, as well as colloquia and round tables with the participation of companies, and a series of quick interviews or speed networking sessions. It is not clear whether all students attend one or more of these training sessions, however, since there is no obligation to do so. Both universities organize a University-Enterprise Day, in which different companies are invited to introduce themselves to the faculty, and where students can leave their CVs and speak with representatives of these companies.

4.2. Design and evaluation of the procedures

Overall procedures are a crucial duty of any organization. They ensure consistency and help gain compliance. Correctly drafted procedures guide actions towards success. They should thus be designed to appropriately document the steps required towards the final purpose, detailing all the tasks to be performed. It is paramount that they are constantly reviewed and updated. This requires to focus on the evaluation of procedures and how improvements are expected to be incorporated. Nor should it be forgotten to collect evidence that will allow the recommended improvements to be identified.

In this study it was important to establish a double follow-up, the purely professional, linked to the company, and the academic, linked to the university, and to organize everything around an academic coordinator, who would develop tasks in both areas, the company area, mainly dealing with the establishment or renewal of agreements, the validation of internship offers, the dissemination and assignment of students; and the academic area, involving the designation of the tutor (who decides whether to ask the students and the company tutor for an intermediate follow-up report), is responsible for the evaluation of learning and student satisfaction, and assesses the internship period and suggests modifications and improvements.

It is crucial that the documentary evidence collected during the process allows improvements to be made, which should be clearly stated in the evaluation of the procedure made by the management centers and decision-making regarding improvements to be introduced.

Needless to say, the level of implementation of the procedures and the related tasks will improve the performance of the organization, and it will certainly exert a positive influence on the satisfaction of its members.

4.3. Satisfaction analysis

The second step was to analyze the satisfaction of the students and that of the company tutors separately. In relation to student satisfaction, the Catalonian Agency for University Quality and Excellence (AQU) offers information[1] about the evaluation of internships in relation to the Catalan University System (SUC), as a whole. The public data is grouped by faculties, but there is no data for individual universities, because this information is only offered in aggregate form. Business and Economics faculties are shown to obtain a lower score for internships than the SUC average (5.8 / 10 compared to 6.6 / 10 of the SUC). This could mean that economics and business students are more demanding of external internships, since, as stated in the aforementioned report, 9 out of 10 companies are satisfied that graduates are adequate for labor market needs (AQU, 2019, page 18).

The third step was to conduct interviews with company tutors to see if the deviation that appears between the two universities can be explained based on a qualitative analysis. Personal interviews were conducted with nine tutors (five from University Y and four from University X). First, they were asked if they had experience with students from other universities which allowed them to make comparisons, and most (except one tutor) answered yes. The majority stated that results depended more on people rather than on the university. Among the weaknesses highlighted by tutors from University Y, which do not coincide with those indicated by those of University X, a lack of motivation/commitment to the internships was notable. Three tutors connected to University Y explained that internships are compulsory, and that this is detrimental to the

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[1] http://www.aqu.cat/doc/doc_51787985_1.pdf pag. 11. This report, published in 2019, shows the effect of the incorporation of Bologna.

performance of the students, since they do not see them as either having potential for learning or as a project towards their future work.

The tutors were also asked what the universities could do to improve the skills of their future graduates. The tutors linked to University Y suggested (based on observed deficits) improvements in the use of the Office package and languages, and emphasized the expansion of relationships between the university and companies in order to establish a productive dialogue. The tutors linked to University X suggested something similar, although they placed less emphasis on expanding the university-company relationship, so we infer that there is more fluidity in this relationship. This was confirmed by the answers to the question about practices and procedures, and the relationship that companies have with the technicians and tutors of the university. While the tutors at University X arrange a set of meetings, email exchanges and telephone calls with university tutors, those at University Y say that they have contact with the academic tutors when a direct link between university and firms exists (i.e. they are a start-up company, or the firm's tutor is an associate professor).

Finally, the tutors were asked about the assessments that the companies made of their work as tutors. Greater acknowledgement of the work of the tutors of University X is revealed, which undoubtedly positively influences the assessment made by the tutors of both universities.

5. Conclusions

This study identified the competences acquired by undergraduate students during their internship and assessed the level of acquisition of these competences, by comparing the student and company tutor evaluation reports, in two universities from the Catalan Higher Education System.

The quality systems of both universities demonstrate that objectives are designed by the management center; they also detail the procedure to be followed in order to develop a work placement. We believe it is important that the procedure includes the idea of continuous improvement, which facilitates the detection of problems and their solutions. If this is true, then the tutors play a crucial role, and believe that a real exchange is taking place with the university, and that their opinions count.

Three main conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of the student and tutor achievement of competence. First, the type of university matters. In six out of six

analyses, University X performed significantly better than University Y. Regardless of whether it was the student self-assessments or the employer opinions, the students from University X scored higher in the three dimensions/sets under analysis. Further investigation is needed to assess the main reasons for this. There are many possible causes: student motivation, the degree of academic instructor involvement, employer expectations, the resources invested in the internship program, the positions in which students start working, the average student performance in their degrees, and so on.

Second, a consistency in the differences corresponding to the three types of competences was detected. The gap between Professional Competences in the universities is twice as big as the gap recorded for the other two competences, from both the student and employer one point of view. The results also seem to suggest that the students at University X work harder. Further research is also required to determine why students at University X are more motivated.

Finally, there is a similar gap between Instrumental and Interpersonal competences, no matter which group made the assessment (students or employers).

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