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Title of the Paper¹

Developing synergetic relationships with the market: The design, implementation, and evaluation of an internship program for students in a Department of Economics from a Greek public university

Abstract

Internship programs function as a bridge of the “classroom” to “action”. The participation of students and market stakeholders in such programs creates a “win-win” synergy, in order to create interactive relationships, which introduce new concepts as vehicles for thought and a more systematic way of approaching relational issues between students and market stakeholders. The aim of this paper is to present the design, implementation, and the evaluation of a Synergetic Internship Program (SIP) for students in a Department of Economics (2005-2007). The evaluation process consisted of the opinion of more than 200 participants students, market stakeholders (110 employers), and 15 faculty professors and staff participated in this project. Data collected by using questionnaires with qualitative and quantitative criteria. This paper used mixed methodological analysis. SIP was also developed to function as a research tool of specialized knowledge in the labor market. Evidence from students, faculty and employers gave us a positive picture. Our program run well and students perceived that gain extra knowledge to close the gap between theory and praxis. The style of supervision (faculty-students-employers) that we followed during the entire SIP placement demonstrated that was beneficial in order to deal with individual problems.

Key words: Practical training/internship, department of Economics, student perception, employees’ perception, faculty involvement, internship evaluation, Greece

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Paper

Introduction

The modern university needs to be able to respond to the new data and the new challenges of the 21st Century because recent and changing developments in the European and national environments are being shaped by new and continuously evolving conditions. Probably the most obvious change is in the development and use of informatics, a field where research benefits from broad based search engines and huge databases; hence, the broadness of the new issues, the need to avoid the partiality of knowledge, and the adoption of documented multi-disciplinary approaches are just several of the components to which all universities must adapt. These changes and adaptations are characterized by many program studies. The science of economics, as it responds to the needs of the future and in order to remain relevant, must certainly adjust to the variety and flexibility of several variables: content, duration, access, differentiation of the “produced product”, It is clear that bridges of communication between programs of study and the specific knowledge of the labour market have to be established. Internship programs function as a bridge from the “classroom” to “action”. The participation of students and market stakeholders in such programs creates a “win-win” synergy, as well as creating interactive relationships that introduce new concepts as vehicles for thought; it also includes a more systematic way of approaching relational issues between students and market stakeholders. The aim of this paper is to present the design, the implementation, and the evaluation of a Synergetic Internship Program (SIP) for students in the Department of Economics, at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki Greece, which took place from 2005 until 2007, and functioned as a bridge between classroom theory and real word practice.

Rational of an internship program

Higher education is not only expected to deliver excellent education and research, it also has to deliver those outputs in ways, volumes, and forms that are relevant to the productive process and relevant in shaping the knowledge of society (Jongbloed et al. 2008). Therefore, programs of study and expanded curriculum should be shaped by a new philosophy and emphasize the creation of two-way relationships between students and faculty that is parallel with traditional programs so that together, they contribute to curriculum planning that connects knowledge, application, and practical training for the students. The participation of students and market stakeholders in such a program will create “win-win” synergy, in both action and rhetoric, in order to create interactive relationships (Gummesson, 1997). These relationships introduce new concepts as a vehicle of thought and utilize additional, systematic ways of approaching relational issues between students and market stakeholders. Arthur (2006) noted that the notion of graduate employability is part of the policy agenda across Europe and elsewhere; meanwhile, Teichler (2008) mentioned “internships” as one of the appropriate learning modes for employable skills. Since the majority of the professional associations in the labour market absorb the graduates from the department of economics, these associations become pools of potential data that can be used for research in order in order to determine what specialized skills, including internships, made the graduates effective employees and how university preparation can best facilitate their job placement following graduation.

Research has found that the completion of an internship assignment during the undergraduate years is a useful strategy in helping secure a career-oriented position after graduation (Callanan, and Benzing, 2004). Internships are an established mechanism to enhance self – and

environmental - awareness (Brooks et al., 1995; Garavan and Murphy, 2001). In addition, internships allow students to directly access job sources, to impress potential employers, to build confidence in their job search, to hone their work values, and build social skills that are beneficial in the employment (French, 2003; Smith 1996; Taylor, 1988). Internship programs function as a bridge “of the classroom” to “action” and as a comparative advancement for full-time employment in the future. Cocco (2000) points out that internships and similar programs provide a “risk-free” method for companies to evaluate their future employees. Greenhous et al. (2000) emphasized that there are many examples of students who participate in such internships [because they provide and] ensure an available pool of future talented newcomers for businesses. That becomes especially true when satisfied students advertise among their peers the positive benefits they received; such advertisement promotes demand for future internships in a tested company. Internship programs offer a variety of benefits to students both for improving performance while in college and for increasing opportunities for job placement upon graduation (Knouse et al. 1999).

The design and implementation of our internship program

The need to develop a Synergetic Internship Program (SIP), which emphasizes selected fields of knowledge, rises increasingly and is intensified in an era where the labour market changes continuously and the inability for graduates of economics to find a job is intensifying. In Greece, SME's represent 98% of the total enterprises and 76% of the total workforce. In addition, information from research projects showed that:

- 1) In 2000, the Hellenic Foreign Trade Board (OPE), and the Federation of Greek Industries (SEB) in cooperation with the Mc Kinsey consultants developed a pilot program regarding the export policy of the Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SME's) that were selected, their weaknesses in this area, etc. The research resulted in the following:
 - a) A few companies offer organized departments of exports
 - b) The companies do not follow an export business plan
 - c) There is a lack of specialized personnel in export marketing
 - d) Companies desire training in matters regarding exports
- 2) E-commerce and its application are not sufficiently prevalent in our country, according to a recent research of the Ministry of Development.
- 3) As far as strategic product management is concerned, nationally (in Greece) this field gained ground from 1990. Most economists would conclude that the companies ought to give necessary attention to the problem of decreasing costs, from the beginning of the chain of value and not only in the in-between stages. In this area, there is a good prospect of employment for students, due to lack of specialized personnel in our country. Similar prospects exist even for students, who will work on the logistics.

Thus, in order to design our university's SIP, we also took into account that internships were considered as one of the primary objectives, especially when we considered the needs that new technology and globalization create. It should be emphasized that Higher Education Institutions sense the pressure that is set upon them in order to respond to the new era and market needs (Zemsky and Massy, 1995). In addition, Jongbloed, Enders, and Salerno (2008) noted that universities are embedded in a national as well regional system – some in the neighbourhood of a large industry, others in more remote areas (p. 307). Thus, in order to develop our practical training program we took into consideration our location and our stakeholders needs (stakeholder theory see Jongbloed, et al. 2008). Additionally, in order to develop our SIP goals, we took into consideration the creation of new strategies to find employment and expanded curricular activities for students. These objectives are considered to be essential not only for universities, but also for the specialized personnel, in order to respond to such changes as: new

technology, knowledge as a capital, changes in the learning environment, adaptability of the market, globalization, multinational students, and social responsibility.

Current SIP goals are:

- a) The systematic support of students in planning their occupational career, as a way to bridge the transition from the classroom to the work world.
- b) The interface of academia with productive units, companies, and their associations.
- c) The information about the availability of employment vacancies and the prospects of their intended three areas of training.
- d) The updating of companies and their associations in the region of Thessaloniki regarding their specialties and the graduates' scientific skills.

Our internship program was designed on the following innovations:

First innovation. The program was designed to avoid direct contact with specific companies so that the whole interaction developed *in a broad based cooperation with professional associations of the city of Thessaloniki* (Thessaloniki Chamber of Small and Medium Sized Industries, Export's Association of Northern Greece, Hellenic Foreign Trade Board, Federation of Greek Industries, etc.). This approach continues to be most beneficial for all stakeholders, having as a key priority the development of a systematic relationship of the Department of Economics with these associations and their members.

Second innovation. The SIP aimed for a particular orientation and did not constitute training with general content. More specifically, the SIP sought to cover positions in *certain specialization-knowledge fields*, where there was a lack of staff in the market. This innovation exploited the fact that the main weaknesses of Greek companies were often the absence of extraversion, the lack of supply for strategic management, logistics, as well as the inefficient knowledge of modern sales techniques, e-commerce etc. Therefore, SIP aimed to:

- Train students with specific skills related to the strategy of exporting companies and later this became a pool for newcomers in those companies,
- Introduce students to product strategic management and logistics techniques
- Allow students to become familiar with new sales techniques, such as e-commerce.

Third Innovation. In order for our senior students to be qualified participants of SIP, they were required to attend seminars. Those included a general framework of focused lectures, readings and discussions that emphasized export business plans, export marketing, logistics, and e-commerce; these seminars provided them the opportunity of direct application of industry-specific content knowledge and background in order to complete their internships in each of the companies that were members of different associations. Although students had been exposed to the academic knowledge in their previous studies, the seminar lectures provided by the Department faculty members, outside experts, and business consultants provided specialized knowledge about the best practices, which were directly applicable and customized to the needs of the market.

The main goal of SIP was the training of our students in the above-mentioned fields because there remains a serious deficit in both organization and personnel within many of the Greek Small and Medium Sized Enterprises. Our SIP training will continue into the future through the relationship that is now established with the professional associations of our city; from previous successes, SIP will continue to remain part of our program studies in our Department.

We expected the following direct and indirect benefits from SIP:

Directly benefited:

Our students gained knowledge and experience in specific fields. SIP was inclusive in participation by the diverse student body (i.e. males, females, student with special needs, and international students)

Indirectly benefited:

- a) The professional associations continued to develop a new action for their members, expanded the scope of activities, and served their members in a new area.
- b) The Department of Economics became involved in the beginning of a systematic cooperation that could be expanded in other disciplines as well.

The SIP development model included:

1. A database of the companies/students will develop in order to observe the project in the most effective way.
2. The students' applications filed according to their grades and their curriculum vitae. They chosen by a three-member committee, that created for this purpose and which consisted of members from the three Sectors of the Departments of Economics.
3. Deviations from the SIP goals will be evident from the student questionnaires, and all the positive and negative points will be recorded.
4. The needs of the companies in knowledge and recruiting personnel will be revealed by the employee questionnaires, in addition to the analyzing whether the program has met its goals from the employees' perspective.
5. The supervising faculty member with periodical observation will be able to create a complete picture of the SIP.

Our SIP is available only for our senior students. Students who participated in our internship program had the opportunity to complete a paid (very small amount) four-month internship. From 2005 to 2007, 200 senior students from the Department of Economics participated in this internship program and worked with more than 80 enterprises that included private and public sectors. Faculty members (15) participated in supervising the entire project. After students completed their internship period, they were required to submit a summary, 10 page, written and electronic report on their experiences. In the beginning of the internship program, guidelines were provided by the staff in our department as a requirement for them to receive a small, stipend payment. Additionally, it is important to note that this training program does operate in some departments across all public universities in Greece. Because the Ministry of Education financially supports these internship programs, participating universities' academic departments are required to submit project proposals in order to qualify for funding. Essentially, policy makers encouraged institutions to become actively engaged in knowledge exchange with the wider environment (Jonbloed et al 2008).

SIP evaluation procedures and outcomes

The SIP evaluation process consisted of opinions from more than 200 participating students, market stakeholders (110 employers), and 15 faculty members (professors and staff) from September 2005 through December 2007. Data was collected by using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. In examining SIP outcomes, we relied on students' opinions twice when we asked them to provide us their opinions about their internship. This was done at the end of the first month and at the end of the internship. As with any experiment where a pre-test and post-test is administered, we perceived that this method would yield more accurate evaluation outcomes. Employers' opinions were collected at the end of the practical training. Participants' gender ratio was 64% female, 36% male, which corresponds to the composition of the student body, including international students. In total, 180 students worked in the private sector and 29 in public sector.

Students' perceptions

After their first working month, students provided positive and negative opinions about their internship experience (Table 1). Findings derived from a qualitative analysis and they were quantified for clarity. From a total collection of 209 questionnaires, they contained 560 individual comments; although 110 questionnaires were negative, 122 of the 209 (56,3%) were positive comments.

Table 1 Overview of our students' perceptions

	Positive comments	Total	Students		Sector	
			Female (134)	Male (75)	Private (180)	Public (29)
1.	Positive attitude from employers and wiliness to teach and provide specific knowledge to the students	145	99	46	123	22
2.	Pleasant, friendly and good working environment	129	85	44	111	18
3.	Opportunities to take active action in their work	36	19	17	33	3
4.	Fair- keep the 6 hours per day (no extra working hours)	45	29	16	41	4
5.	Extra motivation and awards (monetary or emotional)	11	8	3	10	1
6.	Relationship of practical training with the courses that students have been studied (curriculum)	76	46	30	65	11
7.	Smooth transition from the theory to labor market	1	-	1	1	-
8.	Potential to remain in this job	7	5	2	6	1
	Negative comments					
9.	Negative working environment, no friendly co-workers, competitive environment	11	6	5	11	-
10.	Lack of trust and give opportunities for real work	17	13	4	13	4
11.	No relationship between practical training and curriculum	36	24	12	32	4
12.	Lack of the sector to keep the student as a potential employ after the completion of the internship	5	3	2	5	-
13.	Require extra working hours (more than 6 per day)	26	15	11	25	1
14.	No benefits from this practical training	10	9	1	6	4
15.	Poor infrastructure	5	5	-	2	3
	Total	560	366	194	484	76

Upon the completion of their four-month internship, students completed their second evaluation, which totalled 233 valid questionnaires. We used a structured questionnaire that contained 8 questions derived from the literature and from the first qualitative questionnaire.

Students were asked to recall their perceptions' on a 5-point Likert type scale range from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The data was analysed using SPSS by examining frequencies (Table 2).

Table 2 Overview of our students' final perception

Questions	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q1. Did you were steady worker?	4.67	.641
Q2. Relationships with your co-workers	4.65	.673
Q3. Relationships you're your boss	4.50	.767
Q4. Work environment	4.29	.817
Q5. How effective do you believe that your work was in demand ?	4.26	.746
Q6. Evaluate the degree of the attention that you received from the practical sector of the training	4.14	1.003
Q7. Evaluate the work experience that you gained	3.73	.870
Q8. Do you believe that the theoretical knowledge that you gained from your academic department were useful for this particular work?	2.79	1.028

Faculty members' perception

All faculty members (15) who participated in this program had telephone communication with the employers of our students and the vast majority of them noted that the entire program ran well in all 4 cycles (2005-2007). In general, employers did not have problems with our students. In addition, similar perceptions were echoed by our students' voices. Only in rare cases did comments define some inconsistencies between our students' working experience and the work environment (i.e. working extra hours, a different type of work than they were promised, or that employers offered our students work which was neither relevant nor meaningful to the domain of knowledge of business and economics).

Employers' perception

Finally, we had feedback from our students' employers (110). Employers were asked kindly to provide their perceptions on a 5-point Likert type scale range from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The data was analysed using SPSS by examining frequencies. The evaluated questions are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3 Employers perceptions

Questions	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q5. Evaluate student consistent (steady worker)	4.85	.556
Q1. Evaluate your relationships with the training student	4.85	.562
Q2. Evaluate student relationships with co-workers	4.76	.765
Q4. Evaluate how effective was the student in order to meet the work	4.65	.711

requirement		
Q3. Evaluate the attention that you gave to the student	4.44	.796

All responses were above the mean (4,85-4,44), there were no differences between female and male students and there were no difference in private and public sector.

Conclusion

In general, data strongly supports our practical training program as a success. Evidence from students, faculty, and employers gave us a positive picture. Our program ran well and students perceived that they gained extra knowledge to close the gap between theory and praxis. The style of supervision (faculty-students-employers) that we followed during the entire SIP placement demonstrated that a close, working oversight by faculty was beneficial in order to deal with individual problems. We learned what changes are required for us to make in the future and which areas that need more attention in order to have satisfied students and employers. Taking into account our students' perceptions, we need to pay more attention to specific details of their work assignments in order for our students to gain the best benefits from their work experience. Thus, in our future practice we plan to have more communication with the employers in order to give more attention to our students.

This practice aspires to approach the problem of the demand of specialized skills and knowledge in the Department of Economics. The abovementioned SIP will continue in the next four years as a part of a new research project, ESPA. Until now, the results showed that more than 25% of our student participants were hired by the companies that were training them. Therefore, it is possible that SIP will work as a measure of the capacity of the market to absorb the graduates. In addition, it will be used as a compass for possible revision of the curriculum. We will make decisions in judging the quality of our program of studies and the results of our project; specifically, students' and employers' perceptions will be part of our self-assessment report which was recently adopted by our department as part of our quality assurance process.

Last, but not least, in our future SIP, we plan to administrate another survey in order to have our students' expectations from their internship and their final satisfaction towards internship. Thus, this technique will help us to define any gaps, deficiencies, or problems (if any) and the data provided will suggest room for improvement in order to develop and implement our SIP successfully.

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