

## **Organisation and Management of Practicum at the Zimbabwe Open University: Issues of Programme Effectiveness, Benefits and Challenges**

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**Abstract:** *The present study was a case study undertaken to gather the views of students, faculty and employees in the host institutions on the effectiveness of the practicum in the Department of Disability studies and Special Needs Education at ZOU. The study generated data through the use of an in-depth open ended interviews and document analysis. Participants were selected from the 53 students and three faculty from the Department of Disability Studies and Special Needs Education. A non-probability convenience sample of 20 research participants was used in the study. Results from the study, among others, show that the practicum for the Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Special Education had been satisfactorily prepared for through the course SPED403: Practicum. The majority of the students did not want to attend tutorials for the practicum. Assessment for the practicum was less effective to a large extent as in some cases, internal assessment was not being carried out. Some students on practicum were not being assessed mostly due to the dispersion of the students in the programme and lack of funding. Trained and experienced manpower at the host institution to act as supervisors are in short supply and unavailable. Employees in the host institution showed a negative towards the students as those in posts at the host institution felt that the students were a threat to their jobs. Time for the practicum was inadequate as the students could not attain the experience they needed in 200 hours. The study recommended that the university should look for practicum places for the students as stated in the guiding module that the university had organisations they had understanding with. Internal and external assessment should be improved through the appointment of mentors resident in the host institutions, students in the same programme, former students and tutors. There is need to provide sample portfolios for those about to undergo the practicum programme and prospective employers must guarantee to pay and employ the interns. Government should enact legislation to make it compulsory for the host institution to pay for the labour of the intern.*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Imparting relevant skills should not be the prerogative of the training institution alone if issues of relevance have to be accounted for. This therefore, means there is need for both the training institution and the prospective employer to work hand in hand in the production of a fully prepared job incumbent. As such, the training institution has to provide the student with the theory while the prospective employer provides the practical hands on experience. To this end, higher and tertiary institutions have made provisions for internship programmes which entail the student being attached to the prospective workplace. By so doing, the student is exposed to work related experience and is expected to marry the theory learnt at college with the practical experience at the workplace. However, there appears to exist challenges in the arrangement and organisation of these internships programmes, also referred to as attachment, practicum, field work or work related learning. This work related learning has taken many forms and therefore tend to differ from one training institution to the other. Even in the same institution, faculties and departments have tended to employ different methods, policies and practices in their quest to provide learners with the much needed practice. This study focuses on the quality of the field practicum processes at the Zimbabwe Open University` Faculty of Applied Social Sciences, with

the view of ascertaining the effectiveness, benefits and challenges as perceived by different stakeholders.

## **2. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

The Zimbabwe Open University is an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution established on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1999 through an Act of Parliament (Chapter 25:20). That being the case, ZOU offers diploma and degree programmes to those who could not be accommodated in conventional universities. As such, they study in their homes and at their workplaces through distance learning. ZOU currently has four faculties which are the Faculty of Arts and Education, the Faculty of Science and Technology, the Faculty of Commerce and Law and the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences. All these faculties are offering attachment programmes in one way or another except for the Faculty of Commerce and Law.

At the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences, Department of Disability Studies and Special Needs Education, the attachment programme is referred to as practicum. Before, undertaking the practicum, a student is expected to have gone through six full semesters. Thereafter the student registers for the practicum course. The course is meant to assist the student with hands on and clinical experience in Disability and Special Needs Education Programmes. This is an integral and compulsory part of the programme needed to achieve both fluency and mastery in areas that would have been learnt during the six semesters. Students are expected to spend a minimum of one hundred hours of meaningful practice in those relevant settings in the community.

## **3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

A practicum entails an active involvement of the learner chosen in professional field. It gives the learner an opportunity to demonstrate new knowledge with enthusiasm, practice the new skills and give feedback to the tutors of the acquired skills. However, the organisation and management of the practicum is an issue of concern among the different stakeholders. This study therefore, attempts to answer the question: To what extent is implementation and assessment of practicum effective with regard to Bachelor of Science Honours in Special Education at the ZOU?

### **Research Questions**

In an effort to answer the main research question, the following sub-problems which stand as research sub-questions suffice:

- To what extent are students prepared for the practicum?
- To what extent is the assessment of students on practicum effective?
- What is the importance of practicum in the Bachelor of Science Honours in Special Education at the ZOU?
- What challenges confront students in the practicum course?
- What strategies can be adopted for the improvement of the practicum programme?

## **4. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Practicum has been defined differently by different authorities. On one hand, some have defined the term as programmes engaging students in work related activities for the purpose of providing them with hands-on experience that enhances their learning or understanding of issues relevant to a particular area of study (Furco, 1996). On the other hand, McMahon and Quinn (1995) note that practicum is supervised work experiences whereby students leave their institutions and get engaged in work related programmes, during which period they are closely supervised by experienced job incumbents. The philosophy behind practicum is to put into practice the theoretical essences and applying this correctly in the work situation (DuBey et al,1985). To this end, practicum is any carefully monitored piece of work or service experience in which an individual has intentional learning goals and reflects actively on what she or he is learning throughout the experience or duration of attachment.

## **5. IMPORTANCE OF PRACTICUM**

Practicum has offered different benefits to different people (Furco, 1996). Practicum provides students with hands-on experience so that they enhance their learning or understanding of issues

relevant to a particular area of study (Lubbers, 2001). Practicum has also assisted the internee to bridge the gap between the academic learning process and the practical reality (Furco, 1996; Lam and Ching, 2007). Practicum is supervised work experiences where students are closely supervised by experienced and qualified mentors (McMahon and Quinn, 1995; Wheeler, 2001). Practicum has also been used in recruiting decisions by employers (Pasewark *et al.*, 2001). In some fields such as accounting students' academic performance improved notably (English and Koeppen, 1993). In support, Beard (1998) established that students involved in practicum had their knowledge base and motivational level of students enhanced drastically. Further benefits include improvements in career-related direction, gaining practical experience (Lubbers, 2001), improved marketability of graduates (Swift and Kent, 1999; Hymon-Parker, 1998), interpersonal skills (Beard and Morton, 1999) and understanding of the theories of classroom learning (Cook *et al.*, 2004; Hymon-Parker, 1998).

Scott (1992), states that the practicum is the best way for students to explore the suitability of a particular job. It follows, therefore, that the benefits accruing to conventional students may not apply to the ODL student.

Practicum bridged the gap between the theory of the classroom and the world of practice (Nevett, 1985). Practicum was also perceived as a valuable way to acquire broad competencies where the practical knowledge obtained supports and complements the theoretical studies learned in the classrooms (Mihail, 2006). According to Knechel and Snowball (1987), internship attachments were found to enhance students' performance in their courses. But with the practicum coming at the end of the final semester the practicum of such nature would not contribute much to their academic attainment. The practicum is meant to improve students' performance, growth and effort (Cabell, 2000).

Practicum has been seen to be beneficial in socialising the student through training and teamwork assignments at the workplace (Lubbers, 2008). Mihail (2006) noted that interns have successfully developed their personal skills, particularly relating to information technology, time management, communication skills, teamwork, specialist knowledge and ability to prioritize tasks. According to Cannon and Arnold (1998), internship may pave the way for permanent employment upon graduation as well as providing an in-depth understanding of actual business practice. Students hope to receive monetary rewards and be treated as regular employees (Hall *et al.*, 1995). Knechel and Snowball (1987) found that the internship has successfully enhanced the interns' understanding of content in their areas of study.

Poole (2004) points out that students develop an awareness of self in the practicum, practice skills to enhance the well being and development of people with other abilities, learn to use oral and written communication that are consistent with the language of the practicum setting and profession and get opportunities to critically assess, implement and evaluate institution policies and procedures within ethical guidelines. Poole (2004) also states that students get to provide services to different categories of people with disabilities including placements to work on people with disabilities.

Some students on attachment were of the opinion that they gained interpersonal skills in the real work situation. This is probably so in situations whereby they interact and communicate on issues that may need group approaches (Lubbers, 2008; Mihail, 2006; Bukaliya, 2012). Bearing in mind that conflicts are always in existence in organisations, the interns are therefore exposed to situations which assist them to develop the interpersonal skills for use in their present and future organizations.

## **6. CHALLENGES CONFRONTING STUDENTS ON PRACTICUM**

Most students in previous studies felt confused on who should arrange the internships (Gault *et al.*, 2000) and as such the majority of students feel faculty should be actively involved in their placement (Tackett *et al.*, 2001; Maskooki *et al.*, 1998).

Some studies on practicum have shown that periods were too short and insufficient and the majority of students think that the most appropriate internship period should be six months (Bukaliya, 2012; Oliver, 2010; Mihail, 2006). Mihail (2006) also found in his study that most of

the interns preferred to have internship periods ranging from six to nine months instead of three months. This indicated that students are willing to have a longer attachment period and believe that they can learn more within a six month period. Oliver (2010) remarks that the short amount of time the practicum lasts really never lets the student become a fully functional employee because there is not so much to take in for them. According to some, the practicum brings about discord among workers in a variety of ways. Perlin (2011) says this is sometimes so since the practicum displaces paid workers and allow companies to dodge liabilities through the non-payment of intern labour. Students accept the post at no wage to survive the duration of the practicum.

Wheeler (2001) posits that supervision of students on practicum has been cited as being problematic. In some instances, qualified staff to supervise the students has been in short supply (Tackett et al., 2001; Gault et al., 2000). Results elsewhere have shown that supervisors are too busy to provide effective supervision and moreover, some employees regard interns as a threat to their position and in some cases some supervisors possess inferior qualifications than the students (Bukaliya, 2012). In some studies, employers have been accused of treating the interns as cheap labour (Rothman, 2007; Cannon and Arnold, 1998). According to Tackett *et al.* (2001), students feel that there should be careful examination of feedback from employers and interns followed by the modification of the practicum accordingly.

## **7. STRATEGIES ADOPTED FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF THE PRACTICUM PROGRAMMES**

In some studies the interns have suggested the need for a prolonged duration of internship (Mihail, 2006; Bukaliya, 2012). A study by Bukaliya (2012) indicated that interns advocated for the government intervention to ensure that some piece of legislation was put in place to make it mandatory for interns to be paid. The processing of the practicum and arranging the practicum placement should be the role of faculty and not the student (Tackett *et al.*, 2001; Maskooki *et al.*, 1998; Bukaliya, 2012).

## **8. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The present study was a case study undertaken to gather the views of students, faculty and employees in the host institutions on the effectiveness of the practicum in the Department of Disability studies and Special Needs Education. As such it was qualitative seeking to analyse information conveyed through language and behaviour in natural settings (Kumar, 2008; Gray, 2009). The single case study design was adopted since the study only focused on one region of ZOU as well as one department in the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences. The study generated data through the use of an in-depth open ended interview schedule. The in-depth interview has the capacity to gather lots of rich research data from research participants (Seale and Charteris-Black, 2006; Silverman, 2006). Document analysis of the practicum module was undertaken to cross validate data from participants. Being qualitative, this entailed presenting data in form of words resulting in thick descriptions of the issues at hand (Creswell, 2003).

## **9. POPULATION AND SAMPLE**

Participants were selected from the 53 students and three faculty from the Department of Disability Studies and Special Needs Education. Five prospective employers offering attachment to students were also part of the participants. A non-probability convenience sample of 20 research participants was used in the study. This comprised 15 students on practicum, all the three faculty members and five prospective employers who offered attachment to the 15 students.

## **10. PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS**

### **10.1 Sub problem 1: To what extent are students prepared for the practicum?**

Issues raised under this sub problem included the preparatory courses for the practicum. Participants were of the view that they had been satisfactorily prepared through the course SPED403: Practicum. This is an eight unit module that should be covered by the students before undergoing the practicum. In this course, students were exposed to the requirements of the practicum and its objectives. Students were asked if they were aware of these objectives, to which the majority could respond articulately. The same responses were also obtained from the members of the faculty who also indicated that students had been well prepared before taking up the

attachment. Administrative issues pertaining to the practicum were highlighted in the module. One concern, however, raised by a member of faculty was that the majority of the students did not want to attend tutorials for the practicum as they just read the module on their own resulting in them missing out on some clarification. To further demonstrate the state of preparedness, one tutor remarked that all students going on practicum were to produce a practicum proposal which would be discussed before one could be issued with a letter of permission to be accepted by the host institutions.

### **10.2 Sub problem 2: To what extent is the assessment of students on practicum effective?**

The majority of the students were of the opinion that assessment was less effective to a large extent. There were issues that needed to be attended to in the assessment process. For instance, internal assessment was not being carried out. Asked who was to assess them internally, the students stated that their tutors were supposed to but were not making follow ups at the places of attachment. In support of the students' view that students on practicum were not being assessed, the lecturers indicated that they found problems in the assessment of the students on practicum. Mostly, this was due to the dispersion of the students in the programme. There were stationed in various locations which were very far apart. Funds for follow ups were not always available for the internal assessment. However, those located in the vicinity of the university regional centre were supervised and assessed by their lecturers.

On the job assessment and supervision, according to the expectations of module SPED403, should also encompass students in the same programme, former students and tutors (Kaputa and Gwitima, 2012). However, to the students' surprise not much has been done to rope in some of these stakeholders as provided for in the module. According to one participant, most work on assessment was on the final practicum portfolio produced at the end of the practicum period. At the host institution, one participant remarked that there was indeed great work being done by the supervisors. However, the only challenge was that no observation crits were produced during the course of the practicum. Only a letter acknowledging that the student was attached to the institution is produced.

### **10.3 Sub problem 3: What is the importance of practicum in the Bachelor of Science Honours in Special Education at ZOU?**

In responding to the issue of the importance of the practicum, the majority of the participants appeared to appreciate the crucial role played by the programme. Prevalent among the responses generated was the view that the practicum was very important in as far as it helped to link what obtained in the classroom and the actual world of work. In his own words, one of the participants indicated the Bachelor of Science in Special Education and Disability Studies degree would be incomplete without the practicum component. A significant number of responses seem to point to the view that the attachments bridged the gap between the theory of the classroom and the world of practice (Nevett, 1985, Bukaliya, 2012; Mihail, 2006). Given below, are some of the responses from the participants on what they perceive to be the importance of practicum in special needs education:

- Participant 3: I have improved the way I interact with peers after the practicum.
- Participant 6: I gained a lot of experience on how best to do the job. In fact, I am a better practitioner to-be now.
- Participant 11: I have been promised a part time job with the host institution. I could not have got that opportunity in the absence of the practicum session.

Most of these findings seem to concur with those in other studies for example practicum is important in recruiting decisions by employers (Pasewark *et al*, 2001; Cannon and Arnold, 1998). For socialisation, practicum is beneficial to the student (Lubbers, 2008; Mihail, 2006) and improved job performance (Cabell, 2000; Poole, 2004; Knechel and Snowball, 1987).

### **10.4 Sub problem 4: What challenges confront students in the practicum course?**

Most participants were of the opinion that practicum in the department was being confronted by a plethora of challenges. One of the participants indicated that there was lack of follow ups by the

parent institution of students on practicum. This was as a result of lack of funding for the practicum supervision especially for those students located far away from the regional centre. In her own words, one intern had this to say about trained manpower at the host institution, "There are no qualified people to assist me during the practicum. It appears I am the most qualified person in the institution." This goes to show that trained and experienced manpower at the host institution are unavailable. The same issues have been raised in other studies (Tackett et al., 2001; Gault et al., 2000; Bukaliya, 2012), where trained supervisors have been in short supply. However, in some instances it was not the lack of trained manpower but issues to do with attitudes as remarked by one student saying, "I was just looked down upon by the personnel at the host institution. They withheld information I needed as they felt as a teacher I was not going to use the information I had asked for." Such attitude has been attributed to the notion that those in posts at the host institution felt that the students were a threat to their jobs (Bukaliya, 2012).

Notable among other challenges were the following:

- Non-payment of the labour provided at the place of placement
- Students having to look for practicum places all by themselves
- Hostility by the employees in the host institution
- Lack of access to some important records in the host institution
- Time limitations

As stipulated in the guiding module, students are to spend between 100 and 200 hours on practicum. This was deemed inadequate by the students who felt that they could not attain the experience they needed in 200 hours bearing in mind also that they had other pressing needs to look at, as distance education learners. The findings concur with those in other studies (Bukaliya, 2012; Oliver, 2010; Mihail, 2006) where interns advocated for more time on practicum.

### **10.5 Sub problem 5: What strategies can be adopted for the improvement of the practicum programme?**

Participants were asked what they felt could be done to improve the practicum programme. A number of suggestions were brought forward. Some participants were of the opinion that the university should look for practicum places for the students as stated in the guiding module that the university had organisations they had understanding with. Students are looking for places on their own but they have found problems in getting these places. This suggestion has been in a number of other studies where the processing and arranging of the practicum placement should be the role of faculty (Tackett *et al.*, 2001; Maskooki *et al.*, 1998; Bukaliya, 2012).

Some students on practicum stated that there was need to improve on internal and external assessment through the appointment of mentors resident in the host institutions as these would lead, guide and advise a student in a work situation characterised by mutual trust and belief (Schatz, 2006; Wheeler, 2001). Some of the strategies included the following:

- peer supervision;
- collaboration of the training institution and the institutions offering the practicum;
- provision of sample portfolios for those about to undergo the practicum programme; and
- prospective employers guaranteeing to pay and employ the interns.

The issue of unpaid practicum was raised by one unemployed student. In some instances, some students on practicum are paid while others are not. The same student went on to suggest that government should enact legislation to make it compulsory for the host institution to pay for the labour of the intern (Bukaliya (2012).

## **11. CONCLUSIONS**

From the above findings, it is concluded that:

- The practicum for the Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Special Education is being satisfactorily prepared for through the course BSPED403: Practicum.
- Students are quite aware of the objectives of the practicum course.
- The majority of the students do not want to attend tutorials for the practicum.

- Assessment for the practicum is less effective to a large extent as in some cases, internal assessment is not being carried out.
- Some students on practicum are not being assessed mostly due to the dispersion of the students in the programme and lack of funding.
- Students in the same programme, former students and tutors are not being used for assessment as indicated in the practicum module.
- Most work on assessment is on the final practicum portfolio produced at the end of the practicum period.
- No observation crits are produced during the course of the practicum at the host institution as only a letter acknowledging that the student was attached to the institution is produced.
- The majority of the participants appreciate the crucial role played by the programme.
- To the majority the practicum is very important in as far as it helps to link what obtained in the classroom and the actual world of work.
- A significant number of responses seem to point to the view that the attachments bridged the gap between the theory of the classroom and the world of practice
- There are no qualified people to assist during the practicum.
- Trained and experienced manpower at the host institution to act as supervisors are in short supply and unavailable.
- Employees in the host institution show a negative towards the students as those in posts at the host institution feel that the students are a threat to their jobs.
- Other challenges include non-payment for the labour provided at the place of placement.
- Time for the practicum is inadequate as the students could not attain the experience they need in 200 hours.

## **12. RECOMMENDATIONS**

From the above conclusions the following recommendations are made:

- The university should look for practicum places for the students as stated in the guiding module that the university had organisations they had understanding with.
- Internal and external assessment should be improved through the appointment of mentors resident in the host institutions, students in the same programme, former students and tutors
- There is need for effective collaboration between the training institution and the institutions offering the practicum
- There is need to provide sample portfolios for those about to undergo the practicum programme; and
- Prospective employers must guarantee to pay and employ the interns.
- Government should enact legislation to make it compulsory for the host institution to pay for the labour of the intern

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