Chapter 6

Improving Student Internship Through Collaborative Curriculum Design: Needs and Context Analysis to Inform the Design Process

Edward Akomaning

Introduction

Ghanaian polytechnics are confronted with major obstacles. These obstacles can be linked to an episodic relationship between the polytechnics and industries (Gervedink Nijhuis, Bakah, & Akomaning, 2009), the haphazard organisation of student internship (Effah, 2005), irregular revision of curricula (Effah, 2001), and curricula that are supply-driven instead of demand-driven (Akyeampong, 2010). Consequently, many polytechnic graduates cannot find appropriate jobs in industry, let alone establish their own businesses after graduation (Akyeampong, 2010; Japan International Cooperation Agency [JICA], 2001). According to the JICA (2001) report, an estimated 30% of polytechnic graduates were unemployed, and the reason assigned was inadequate acquisition of employable skills. There is a growing public concern about the quality of polytechnic graduates (Alagaraja & Arthur-Mensah, 2013).

One main problem in the polytechnic system in Ghana is its inability to facilitate effective internships for students. Internship refers to a form of workplace learning (Levesque, Lauen, Teitelbaum, Alt, & Librera, 2000) where students are sent to various organisations. It is a vital component of higher professional education. It allows students to gain valuable, marketable skills to place on their resumes. Despite the availability of good training, employers place a higher priority on actual experience in acquiring technical skills. Therefore, no matter how well-trained he or she might be, a worker without practical, hands-on work experience may not be consid-

E. Akomaning (✉)

Institute for Educational Planning and Administration, University of Cape Coast,
Cape Coast, Ghana

e-mail: eakomaning@ucc.edu.gh

ered for most jobs involving newly-acquired technical skills (Carlin & Manson, 2007). This underscores the need for training programme elements, such as internships, that provide training in a hands-on format that teaches technical skills as they would be used on the job. The polytechnics in Ghana lack well-designed curriculum materials as well as coherence in the curriculum for student internship. Effah (2005) describes the internship situation as unsystematic and unstructured, partly because there is no clear curriculum for students, industry personnel and teachers to follow during the internship.

The purpose of the present study was to contribute to an improved curriculum for student internship through the involvement of major stakeholders (teachers, industry and students) in the (re-)design of student internship in the Hotel Catering and Institutional Management (HCIM) programme in Ghanaian polytechnics. This study presents a context and needs analysis that was carried out to analyse the stakeholders' perceptions of the links between the educational institution (i.e., the polytechnic) and the hospitality industry where students go for internship, in order to inform the curriculum design team.

Context of the Study

The context of this study is the Department of Hotel Catering and Institutional Management (HCIM), which is responsible for training students to assume managerial or supervisory roles in the hospitality industry in Ghana and beyond. The HCIM programme is a 3-year tertiary programme that commenced in 1993. Entrants into the programme are predominantly those who have successfully completed the Home Economics programme at their senior secondary school. Successful students graduate with award of the HND (Higher National Diploma certificate in hospitality management. Teaching and learning in the HCIM programme are supposed to be a blend of theoretical and practical lessons. In order to fulfil this mandate, internship programmes are organised for students in which they apply to industries of their choice. Internship programmes occur in two sessions throughout the 3-year programme. Each session spans a period of 3 months at the end of every academic year. So, in all, students are supposed to be at internships for at least 6 months out of the entire study period of 3 years. These internship periods are supposed to be supervised by both polytechnic educators and industry representatives. In order to facilitate the internship programmes, each polytechnic has an Industrial Liaison Unit, whose primary responsibility is to ensure that students have places to carry out an internship.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Conceptualisation of Student Internship Practices

Internship is considered to be an opportunity to integrate career-related experiences into an education programme by having students participate in planned and supervised work (Bakar, Harun, Yusof, & Tahir, 2011). It is a temporary position with an emphasis on workplace learning, usually for a fixed period of time before graduation. According to Billett (2001), such an experience, learning through participating in work, can be understood in terms of how the workplace supports or inhibits individuals' engagement in work activities and access to both direct and indirect guidance. Hence, internships need to be conceptualised more clearly as authentic workplace learning environments (Blokhuys & Nijhof, 2008) through which the industry's contributions can be best organised to assist the learning required of the intern (Billett, 2006). Without the identification, conceptualisation and acknowledgement of an internship curriculum, internships will remain misunderstood and de-legitimised.

Internship is often viewed as a situation that is beneficial for the intern, the educational institution and the intern's employer (Borkowski, 2008; Divine, Linrud, Miller, & Wilson, 2007). These mutual benefits, nevertheless, cannot be guaranteed, because the success or failure of the internship depends largely on the way the various stakeholders collaborate in its implementation process.

Four conditions have been found to be essential for effective student internships:

Collaboration Collaboration between the educational institution, the industry and the student is essential for successful internship practices (Clark, 2003; Schappert 2005). These three parties need to agree on the conditions of the internship, the responsibilities of each party, and the reporting requirements. The formalisation of links between industry and the polytechnics will foster collaboration. Effective collaboration between the industry and the educational institute prevents internships that result in students performing boring and irrelevant tasks, with limited or no contribution to their learning (Johnston, 2008). Relevant internship experiences prepare students to feel confident at the start of their professional career (Christou, 1999). Internship therefore plays a vital role in student learning in industry. Thus, a well-organised internship will help students to transit smoothly from school to industry (Carlin & Manson, 2007). The third party, the students, also need to understand what the educational institution and the industry might expect from them and how they will be treated by their employer and the employees. Collins (2001) found that interns felt that the attitude of their supervisor was sometimes negative, that employees and interns did not interact well and that the environment was sometimes uncomfortable and hectic, with too few responsibilities and opportunities for learning.

Placements Divine et al. (2007) distinguished between managed and unmanaged arrangements for student internships. In managed internships, schools are responsible for student internships. They cater for enough internship places; it often implies that students are assigned an internship place. In unmanaged internships, students are expected to find themselves an internship place. The latter option is pretty close to what is practised in Ghanaian polytechnics, which Effah (2005) described as unstructured. Fonselius, Hakala and Holm's (2001) discussion of students being responsible for looking for internship places themselves is comparable to the practice in Ghanaian polytechnics. While managed internships may be a better guarantee of a high quality internship experience, unmanaged internship may have the advantage that students have a better and more realistic perspective of the actual labour market, which is important for future employment (Divine et al., 2007). The drawback of the latter is that students who are not able to find a place themselves might not have an internship experience at all or might have a delay in their studies. In the case of managed internship practices, the educational institution has better control of the relevance and quality of the internship experiences of their students (League of Oregon Cities, 2009), which can ensure better coherence between the theory and practice learned in school and the experiences gained outside school (Walo, 2001).

Duration Internships can be organized in a full-time setting or concurrent with in-school learning in a part-time setting (Divine et al., 2007). Polytechnics in Ghana have adopted the former, which is similar to what is done by some Singaporean polytechnics (Republic Polytechnic, 2008). A 6-month mandatory period is earmarked for internship. This duration agrees with what is seen in other academic institutions around the globe (Lam & Xiao, 2000; Mihail, 2006; Walo, 2001). The full-time option has as its advantage the complete immersion of students in the world of work. It allows students to take internships in a wider geographical region and thus get acquainted with a larger variety of options. On the other hand, the part-time option allows for better exchange between various internship practices experienced by students and the theories they have learned in school.

Assessment Assessment of student internship practices assumes agreement between the expectations of the industry and the educational institutions about the tasks students can and should accomplish during their internships. However, several studies have shown that these expectations often differ (Lam & Ching, 2007; Waryszak, 2000), which may result in assessment practices in which the intern's supervisors from the educational institution and the industry differ (Republic Polytechnic, 2008; Walo, 2001).

It is expected that curriculum materials describing the joint expectations for student internships and the obligations for all involved may contribute to the implementation of effective internship practices. Involving core stakeholders in the design of such curriculum material is assumed to contribute to its quality and practicality.

Designing for Curriculum Quality

According to Kessels and Plomp (1999), the quality of educational programmes is, to a large extent, determined by the “consistency” of the curriculum. Kessels and Plomp (1999) distinguish between internal and external consistency. The logical sequence linking the various components of the curriculum is defined as internal consistency. Internal consistency is reached through a “systematic approach” (Kessels & Plomp, 1999). It implies the systematic design sequence of analysis, design, development, implementation and evaluation, comparable to the description of curriculum development by Van den Akker (2003).

External consistency, on the other hand, refers to the coherence of stakeholders’ perceptions. External consistency is reached through a “relational approach”, corresponding to the communicative paradigm (Kessels & Plomp, 1999). It implies the involvement of stakeholders in the design and development process, thereby revealing their perceptions of the main goals of the process and of how they should be achieved. Curriculum work is multifaceted; hence, the role or input of identifiable stakeholders in the design process should be given the utmost consideration. By so doing, their divergent needs may be catered for, thereby promoting the curriculum’s relevance for its subsequent users.

Marsh and Willis (2003) identified several stakeholders in the entire process of planning and developing the curriculum. The stakeholders can range across educational officials, students, parents, members of the community and teachers. Within vocational education, the teacher, student and employer are usually seen as key stakeholders in the process of planning and developing the curriculum (Hughes, 2009). These stakeholders ensure that the collaboration between the educational institutions and industries is fostered, with the ultimate aim of enriching students with employable skills.

Teachers are the educational practitioners who live closest to the underlying tensions involved in curriculum work and who have the most at stake in understanding what curriculum development actually entails and how it influences them and the students (Marsh & Willis, 2003). Because teachers are core stakeholders in curriculum enactment, active involvement of teachers in curriculum design might essentially contribute to internal and external consistency. Research has shown that teachers’ active involvement in the (re-)design of the curriculum results in curriculum materials that are both valid and feasible (Ben-Peretz, 1990; Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi, & Gallagher, 2007). Recent studies have shown that the implementation of curriculum innovation is fostered when teachers collaboratively (re-) design the curriculum (Cviko, McKenny, & Voogt, 2014; Penuel et al., 2007; Simmie, 2007). We will refer to such practice as Collaborative Curriculum Design (CCD).

Designing curricula presupposes engagement in a number of activities that generally take the form of analysis, design and development, implementation, and evaluation. As Van den Akker (2003) stipulated, curriculum development is: “...usually

a long and cyclic process with many stakeholders and participants in which motives and needs for changing the curriculum are formulated; ideas are specified in programs and materials; and efforts are made to realize the intended changes in practice” (p. 2). However, research on teachers’ collaborative curriculum design has shown that the analysis phase is often underestimated or skipped when teachers collaboratively design curriculum (e.g., Handelzalts, 2009; Huizinga, 2014). For that reason, this study focuses on the first step of a collaborative curriculum design process, the context and needs analysis.

The Study

Research Purpose and Method

The context and needs study aimed at identification by the stakeholders of the problems regarding organisation of student internship in the polytechnics in Ghana and gave direction to subsequent design studies (Akomaning, 2012).

This study focused on the perceptions of key stakeholders in the Hotel Catering and Institutional Management (HCIM) sector in Ghana regarding problems and potential solutions in student internship. A cross-sectional survey study was conducted to solicit information from key stakeholders.

Data Collection

Four HCIM Departments were involved in the study. In total, 160 students, 40 alumni, 45 teachers, 12 management representatives and 20 representatives from the hospitality industry were selected as participants. A questionnaire was developed to gather information about the four components needed for effective internship practices (collaboration, placement, duration and assessment). The questionnaire contained mainly Likert-scale response items; in addition, a few open-ended questions were posed.

Teachers, students and management representatives were all sent questionnaires, and the response rates were 73%, 100% and 92% respectively. Alumni and hospitality industry representatives were also each sent a questionnaire. The response rate in each case was 100%.

Main Findings

The aim of this context and needs analysis was to identify problems and potential solutions in the organisation of student internship in the HCIM programmes in Ghana's polytechnics. The research question addressed stakeholders' perceptions of the organisation of student internship.

Perceptions of management representatives, teachers, students, alumni and industry personnel generally did not differ on the relevant conditions (collaboration, placement, duration and assessment) that contribute to the benefits derived from well-managed internship. The polytechnics' collaboration with industry needed to be reinvigorated to foster better management of student internship and creating enough capacity for students to having appropriate internships. Participants identified active involvement by industry and teachers in student internship and extension of time for internship as critical for interns' training.

Social, economic, and technical deficiencies and lack of professional commitment were challenges faced by students during their internship. The major findings showed that students were assigned to one department for the entire training period in industry, jobs/duties assigned were manual and menial, supervision was lacking, workers had an uncooperative attitude towards interns, students were not able to fulfil the mandatory 3 month period of internship, 20% of students did not get an internship placement and the relationship between the polytechnics and industry was episodic.

The need for curriculum materials to guide student internship was expressed, because it was found that student internship had no written curriculum specifying the distinctive roles of teachers, students and industry personnel during the internship. To ensure quality of the curriculum materials in terms of consistency, practicality and effectiveness, all stakeholders need to have input into the design of curriculum materials for student internship.

Reflections

Capacity has been identified as one of the missing links in the organisation of student internship in Ghana's polytechnics. In the context of student internship, the application of capacity was unstructured and faced with challenges. Hence the expected mandated functions or roles of teachers, students and industry personnel were not being efficiently and effectively executed. In view of this, the research sought to address these challenges by adopting collaborative curriculum design as a bottom-up approach empowering teachers in the Departments of HCIM. Teachers

in design teams, that work with the input provided from students and industry representatives, eventually designed curriculum materials to help streamline the activities of student internship.

The importance of taking into account the context within which needs are identified, which in this study was student internship in Departments of HCIM in polytechnics in Ghana, cannot be underestimated. The outcomes of the context and needs analysis study informed the industrial liaison officers, teachers, students and industry personnel (key stakeholders) in the hospitality management programme. Following this creation of awareness, the stakeholders, particularly the teachers, expressed the need for well-thought-out curriculum documents to be designed to help streamline the student internship. The need to design curriculum documents prompted the pursuit of collaborative curriculum design in design teams as a bottom-up approach that would be feasible for addressing the implementation challenges. The explicit input of various stakeholders through the needs and context analysis contributed to the development of external consistency during the process of curriculum design. In this research project, not only was teachers' active involvement necessary for the realization of valid and practical curriculum materials, but the involvement of industry and students was also key to the success of the curriculum materials.

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