

# Establishing relevance through cooperative education in Ghana: A study of Central University

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This research sought to investigate the perceived relevance of cooperative education to final year students of the Communication Studies Department at Central University (CU) in Ghana. The research employed a qualitative approach to examine how interns perceived the relevance of courses offered by the department to the world of work with emphasis on course utility and relatedness. The study was motivated by the perceived difficulties students face transitioning from higher education to full-time employment. A total of 30 students participated in five focus group sessions. Guided by the concept of cooperative education, the study found that students perceive the internship as a worthwhile initiative although the time allocated to it was considered inadequate for students' skills development. The study concludes that the current learning of students is related to their future careers, but, the internship program is poorly designed and needs some modification.

Keywords: Relevance, cooperative education, internship, higher education, skills development, Ghana

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Some scholars have identified cooperative education as one of the ways in which higher educational institutions could remain relevant in society (Nevison, Drewery, Pretti and Cornier, 2016; Holmes, 2013). Cooperative education can be considered as a model under the umbrella term work-integrated learning (Fleming and Hickey, 2012). Therefore, work integrated learning (WIL) scholars suggest that students undertake cooperative education, to ensure experiential education which formally integrates their studies within a practice setting. These scholars have placed emphasis on the skills development of students through training and guidance. Holmes (2000) believes that skills gained through cooperative education give students an added advantage on the job market. According to Davies and Pillay (2000), "higher education institutions can no longer operate in isolation and must stay abreast of the times and adjust their curricula to the ever-changing employment market requirements, to ensure relevancy".

Many students face difficulties transitioning from higher education to full-time employment (Arthur and Flynn, 2012). In order to overcome these challenges, some educational experts have argued that higher education programs need to re-think the ways in which graduates are prepared for the workplace (Patton & McMahon, 2014). According to Freudenberg, Brimble and Vyvyan (2010), "one technique that could improve students' work readiness and ability to transfer theoretical knowledge into the practical implementation, is work integrated learning".

Consequently, many universities are now incorporating work integrated learning programs in their curricula with the aim of enhancing graduate employment prospects based on their acquisition of requisite skills for the job market (Holmes, 2013). Nevison et al., (2016) posit that educators are under increased pressure to demonstrate the ways in which they contribute to students' development, particularly with respect to workplace outcomes. They suggest that educators should consider the inclusion of reflection in program curricula to promote students' career development. Furthermore,

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cooperative education may represent a container in which reflection upon work experiences is more likely to occur. Consequently, this current study seeks to investigate how final year undergraduate students of Central University in Ghana perceived the relevance of work integrated learning and the challenges associated with the execution of this learning method.

#### COOPERATIVE EDUCATION (INTERNSHIP) AT CENTRAL UNIVERSITY

Cooperative education has been defined as a structured method of combining classroom-based education with practical work experience which provides academic credit. In line with this, cooperative education at Central University generally involves students interning with organizations where skills acquired in the classroom can be applied. Inasmuch as internships may provide avenues for employment, interns are not bound to work for the employer on completion of the placement. The internships help students to determine their career goals and to match up their aspirations with real job roles. In addition, students undergo conventional academic learning at the tertiary level and combine this learning with time spent in a relevant workplace or industry setting (Fleming & Hickey, 2012).

Internships are the most common form of WIL (PhillipsKPA, 2014). At Central University, the internship program has been an integral part of the course structure of the Department of Communication Studies since 2011. The program aims at producing graduates in Public Relations, Advertising, Broadcasting and Print Journalism. The internship covers a single, uninterrupted period between the end of the second semester of the third year of the undergraduate program and the beginning of the first semester of the fourth year.

Cooperative education at Central University is to help students put into practice what they have learned in the classroom. No student from the department can graduate from the University without having successfully fulfilled that requirement. This underscores the importance the department attaches to on-the-job training experience. By implication, the program initiators had considered and placed a high premium on the relevance of internship as a prerequisite for success at the workplace.

#### UTILITY RELATEDNESS AND RELEVANCE

There are two basic ways in which curriculum can be used to provide relevance for students: utility value and relatedness (Ormrod, 2008). Utility value answers the question "What am I going to use this course for?" Utility value emphasizes the importance of content for the students' short-term and long-term goals (Ormrod, 2008). It provides relevance first by engaging students' interest-telling them the content is important to their future goals. It then continues by showing or explaining how the content fits into their plans for the future. This helps students to realize that the content is not just interesting but also worth knowing (Ormrod, 2008). Relatedness, on the other hand, answers the question: "What has this got to do with me?" (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The academic perspective involves students' ability to find elements of what they learn in the classroom on the job.

Relatedness and utility both provide relevance to students in relation to job roles and responsibilities at work. There should be a link between a students' courses of study and effective execution of job roles and responsibilities to support relevance. Where students see a relationship between their course of study and future careers, they become more open to appreciating course relevance. A relationship between the course of study and future careers tends to be incomplete when the element of utility is not introduced. In essence, students must also perceive the usefulness of courses of study to their various roles and responsibilities in the field of work.

Relatedness is important to students of all ages, while utility value tends to gain importance as students become older and choose courses that will help them achieve their career goals. Relevance is exceptionally important to students who are required to take classes they did not choose such as general education courses, which speaks to the university-wide courses. Relevance can help students realize how useful knowledge can be. Fulfilling students' need for relatedness, showing them how seemingly unrelated content fits together and then into their own scheme of things, and giving students real reasons why today's content will be useful to them later on are all good ways to provide relevance for students.

#### PROBLEM STATEMENT

The successful completion of an 8-to-12-week internship program is one of the requirements for graduation. Just like the internship program, passing the university-wide courses is a prerequisite for graduation for every student in the university. These courses include Life Management Skills, Principles for Purposeful Living, Everyday French, among others. Interns are expected to complete an evaluation form at the end of their internship for grading purposes. The university-wide courses are run by a Vision and Legacy unit under the faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. These courses are to provide some grounding for students in the area of general knowledge. The rationale for the introduction of university-wide courses in the curriculum is to complement the knowledge students' gain from their specialty areas to enable them to perform better at the workplace. In other words, the curriculum developers intended to cultivate some sort of marriage between the university-wide courses and the regular academic courses offered by the departments.

In the research conducted in 2016, many of the students indicated that the courses that helped them perform their job roles were offered by the Vision and Legacy unit other than the department of Communication Studies. This observation was worrisome, since the Department prides itself in providing skill sets in four specializations, viz, Public Relations, Advertising, Broadcasting and Print Journalism. It was not quite clear why students who were pursuing specializations in any two of the above fields of study would not find those programs useful for their job roles during their internship.

Besides, there does not appear to be any systematic structure established for faculty and students to measure the perceived relevance of the internship program as well as its utility. This research therefore seeks to determine the status of cooperative education in Central University within the tripartite relationship namely the employer, the university and the students. It also sought to identify some of the challenges inherent in the current curriculum for redress.

#### OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Consequently, the objectives of this WIL study were to:

- examine what courses of study students perceived to be relevant to this experience in the area of course utility and relevance, and
- identify the challenges emanating from the management and implementation of work WIL at Central University.

## RELATED WORKS AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### *Co-op Education as a form of Work-Integrated Learning*

WIL has for many years been considered an authentic experience that helps develop graduates' employability skills and has great benefit to students (Patrick, Peach & Pocknee, 2008; Smith, Ferns & Russell, 2014). Evidence from Skorikov and Vondracek (2011), suggests that work experience contributes to the shaping and expression of one's identity. Thus, students have the opportunity to integrate learning in the classroom with practical experience from the field of work. This may help to crystallize students' skills needed in future job roles which will expose them to work place skills.

According to Jackson (2010) and Whelan (2017a), WIL provides an opportunity to measure the attainment of learning outcomes in an authentic, quantifiable way. One of the goals of WIL is to deepen classroom conceptions, apply skills and make the curriculum more meaningful to students (Orrell, 2011). Central University's Internship Policy permits an internship period of 8 to 12 weeks. The policy document defines an internship as a method of on-the-job training for various professions and careers. Students can use an internship to determine if they have an interest in a particular career or to create a network of contacts. Central University has adopted the term "internship" to refer to a focused, short term supervised work placement for any student who has completed the third year. The university accepts the broad interpretation of internship to include attachment, rotation, apprenticeship and cooperative education. Some interns find permanent, paid employment with the organizations for which they worked.

A study by Whelan (2017b), on WIL and engagement with industry noted some important connections with industry partners who supervised students on their eight-week placement. Also, the reflective journals of students on placements confirmed that they appreciated the value of their experiential learning through the WIL. A recent study by Nevison et al., (2016) concluded that students who engage in WIL exhibit reflective and integrative behaviors significantly more than their non- WIL peers.

Govender and Wait (2017) indicates that WIL forces students to be productive and to do real work that translates into social and economic values. De Lange (2004) notes that it is not helpful to the student and even the university to allow the student to wade through muddy waters in order to find their feet in a job that provides them with relevant roles tailored for their future careers. Hence the concept of WIL has been lauded by many scholars for fastening the feet of students unto the firm grounds of the world of work.

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR FIELD WORK

The researchers ensured that ethical canons were adhered to in the selection and interviewing of respondents for the study. To ensure privacy and anonymity the names and the identities of respondents were not stated in this study. Written consent was sought from respondents before participating in this research. To guarantee objectivity, the responses were discussed and analysed accurately throughout the study without falsify responses to ensure the integrity of the research. Finally, the research and conferences committee of Central University gave ethical approval after thorough examination of the data collection processes.

## METHODS

In order to collect relevant data for the study the following methods were used: focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and documentary analyses. A total of 30 students were engaged in five separate focus group discussions. This allowed for rich descriptions of the students' perceptions of cooperative education at the university. The students were selected using the simple random sampling method. This gave each student an equal chance of being selected. Each focus group had six discussants. The focus group discussions allowed the researchers to engage the students on how they understood the questions on the internship forms which were analyzed as data for this study.

The in-depth interview method was also employed to gather data from a total of seven industry supervisors in a semi-structured form. The supervisors were selected purposively as the study was interested in only individuals who had supervised students participating in the focus group discussion. The researchers believe that these data- collection methods helped unearth the blurred areas of how the students perceived the relevance of the internship program as a variant of WIL. Both interns and supervisors were given evaluation forms to complete at the end of the internship period. These forms were analyzed as part of the documentary analysis. For this study the interview guide was very specific, with carefully worded questions encompassing the list of areas to be covered to answer the research questions. The responses from the industry supervisors and the documentary analyses were highlighted and placed under key thematic areas relevant to the research.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### *Organizations where Students Interned*

The desk research showed that 58 students participated in the 2016 internship program. They were engaged by 46 organizations, 24 of which were media or communication-related while 22 were not. A further breakdown shows that 31 of the 58 interns gained their exposure in the media and communication environments while the remaining 27 students interned outside of media and communication organizations (see Table 1). A few of the organizations engaged more than one intern, hence the apparent disparity between the number of organizations and the number of interns.

TABLE 1: Nature of organizations where students interned.

Category	No. of organizations	No. of interns
Number within media and communication	24 (52%)	31 (53%)
Number outside media and communication	22 (48%)	27 (47%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>46 (100%)</b>	<b>58 (100%)</b>

It can be argued that it is possible for an organization that is presumed to be outside the media and communication enterprise to offer communication experience to interns. For example, any organization with a public relations or corporate affairs department can offer meaningful training and exposure to students specializing in public relations.

### *Subjects Studied versus Subject Content Applied*

The findings showed that not all the courses taken by the students had a direct bearing on the performance of their internship. In Table 2, the students listed the courses and the number of times

they had to draw from the content of those courses to address problems they faced at the workplace. This means that the interns were able to draw on some of the principles, theories and ideas that they had learned in class to execute and address workplace challenges. Some of the courses listed were public relations, broadcast journalism, print journalism, media ethics, fundamentals of communication, advertising and photojournalism.

TABLE 2: Communication courses studied and frequency of mentions.

Serial Number	Course Title	Frequency of Mentions
1	Fundamentals of Communication	44
2	Public Relations	22
3	Research Methods	18
4	Advertising	13
5	Print Journalism	13
6	Media Ethics	10
7	Broadcast Journalism	10
8	All Communication Studies Courses	4
9	Social Psychology	1
10	African Studies	1
11	Photojournalism	1
12	Development Communication	1
13	Online Media	1

In addition to the courses taught in the department, discussants listed the following university-wide courses as having been relevant to their internship experience: Financial Literacy, Leadership Skills, as well as Entrepreneurship, Life Management Skills, French and English Proficiency. These courses, according to the students, enabled them to relate to their superiors and colleagues in a professional manner. Furthermore, the courses helped them to manage their time better thereby contributing to their general output as interns. One of the interns reported, "The university-wide courses were really helpful, and they came in really handy. For instance Life Management Skills taught me about time and how to relate to my supervisors".

#### *Job Roles*

In analysing the job roles of the interns, there seems to be three distinct yet integrated categories of students: viz (i) those who thought the university wide courses helped them better, (ii) those who put the university wide courses and the communication courses on the same level of importance and (iii) those who considered the communication courses as having been more relevant than the university wide courses in the performance of their intern duties. Job titles of the interns included sales representative, media monitor, reporter, customer care, radio producer, television producer, teaching assistant, journalist, front desk attendant, and public relations executive. Almost all these job titles are

directly related to the communication program. However, some interns thought that the university-wide courses helped them better than the communication courses.

Interns who worked with television and radio stations, in addition to studying broadcasting and print journalism courses, listed Leadership Skills, Life Management Skills, Institutional Governance, and Principles for Purposeful Living as courses that helped them during the internship program. A discussant noted, "I worked with a TV station, and Life Management Skills helped me with being punctual because you can't afford to be late for production."

Discussants who performed roles and positions with organizations which did not have a direct relationship with media and communication courses such as teaching assistants, out-patient department officers, budget officers, as well as record-keeping and freight-forwarding officials, listed university-wide courses such as Leadership Skills, Life Management Skills, and Institutional Governance as having been relevant to their internship experience. One intern remarked that "Generally the university-wide courses taught me about daily expectations at the workplace and helped me with dealing with stress and pressure during the internship program."

TABLE 3: University wide courses and frequency of mention.

Serial Number	Course Title	Frequency of Mentions
1	Principles for Purposeful Living	50
2	Life Management skills	51
3	Transformational leadership	20
4	Christian Ethics	23
5	Skills for Success	50
6	ICT	15

#### *Student Placement*

With regards to placement, the current policy of the university is to make interns look for organizations where they plan to have their work-integrated experience. The interns interviewed were of the view that the university should establish some formal relationship with industry or organizations that are willing to use their services. The university could sign Memorandum of Understanding with these organizations to formalize the relationship. According to one discussant such an approach will take the burden off the shoulders of students who literally must go from one organization to another seeking placement. She complained that "looking for placement is not easy at all so the department should help us find places to do our internships". Another said, "Looking for a place to do your internship is a challenge; the university can team up with some companies to help us". Discussants were unhappy about organizations rejecting them but then finally recalling them just one month from the end of the internship program with a placement offer. This, according to the students, places undue stress and pressure on them and does not help them in executing their roles properly.

The inability for all interns to start and end the internship at the same time was identified by some of the students as a matter of concern. According to one of the interns, if interns are able to start on the first day it will give them ample time to undertake the internship. Currently, it is difficult to have all

the students start on the same date. Some students are unable to secure internship placements within one or two months of the commencement of the program. One intern noted that, "Last time I spent almost two months at home looking for a place; in the end, I worked for only a few weeks, so really, I couldn't learn much". In instances like this it becomes quite tempting for students to falsify the duration of the internship to meet the university's minimum requirement, when in reality the experience was inadequate.

One discussant added that the internship positions and roles they are given in some organizations are in no way related to the media and communication program thereby making the execution of such roles uninteresting. He said, "Because we find it difficult to get placements we settle for organizations and job roles that have nothing to do with communication studies". Discussants preferred to intern in organizations within the field of media and communication, which in the end will help with the practical aspects of the learning they acquire at Central University. It is therefore possible for interns to complete the internship program without having learned anything substantial relating to their areas of specialization. In other words, the internship, as currently structured, undermines the benefits to be derived from work-integrated learning- the interplay between theory and practice.

### *Grading*

The internship program is worth three credit hours. The students know that the internship grading contributes to the class of degree they obtain from Central University. The intern's evaluation report counts for 50% of the grading. The remaining 50% is based on the workplace supervisor's responses to objective questions about the interns and their performance.

Some of the interns felt that the grading system was not fair. One discussant was appalled at how grades were apportioned for the internship programs. She observed that "some students who don't faithfully even undertake the internship receive better grades than those who bother, simply because of the forms they are made to fill out at the end of the internship program." She further noted "It is very painful when you undertake the internship for a whole three months and someone who probably didn't intern gets a better grade than you, simply because maybe the person's English is better than yours on the internship form". A discussant attributed this apparent defect to lack of supervision on the part of university officials. The discussant added, "I think that we should be graded based on what our supervisors see us do at work and not on what we write on the internship form. It is so unfair".

Discussants were of the view that if supervisors took a keen interest in the internship program of each student, the grading would be fairer, as grades would be based on merit of execution rather than the filling out of internship review forms. So, if a student is unable to appropriately articulate the internship experience on paper, should s/he be penalized even though s/he might have performed exceedingly well on the job? This may raise other questions. For example, if the argument above is accepted without question, then it will endorse a situation where communication students who are unable to communicate effectively on paper are rewarded for their language deficiency. In addition, how can the university guarantee fairness in the allocation of marks by the workplace supervisors, especially, in respect of responses to open-ended questions?

### *Supervision*

The internship is structured in such a way that the students receive supervision from a person within the organization where they intern, designated as a workplace supervisor. In addition to the internal supervision, it is expected that the university will also send out its own supervisors to monitor the



students and to receive on-the-spot feedback from the internal supervisors. Sometimes, with a class size of more than a hundred students, it becomes quite a difficult task for one lecturer to perform that function. This task is made much more challenging when the interns are spread throughout the country and sometimes beyond. In relation to this, Wessels (2007) indicates that resource provision is imperative if the internship program is to be successful. Both human and financial resources are needed for the implementation of the internship. This may call for some readjustment to the way the university allocates its resources for WIL.

### *Duration*

Concerning the duration of the internship, some discussants suggested that the internship program be run every long vacation for three years to enable students to develop more self-confidence, leadership skills and teamwork. One discussant remarked “The time for the internship is too short, especially because we don’t get placements as soon as we apply”. One recurring observation by the workplace supervisors was the short duration of the internship. One supervisor offered the following recommendation to improve the quality of the program:

While commending Central University, Ghana, for introducing this internship program, the length of time should be increased so that the students can make more positive impact before the end of the program. Hence, I suggest a change/improvement from two months to about six months.

This observation ties in neatly with work-integrated learning. More than 80% of the workplace supervisors called for an extension of time, though most of them stopped short of stating how long the ideal internship period should be. Bearing in mind that currently the students go for internship in the second semester break of the third year (i.e. prior to the first semester of the final year), any extension will distort the academic schedule planned for the year. However, it is possible for the university to consider other options. These include (i) starting the internship from the second year of the four-year program and spreading it over two or three years; (ii) doing the internship in one uninterrupted stretch at the beginning of the first semester of the second year. The students would then return to the university for the second semester, when the university would provide platforms for their feedback. This can be designed to accommodate question-and-answer sessions.

The nature of the internship program at Central University is the inadequate time duration allocated to the students’ skills development. For the tripartite group (students, internship supervisors and organizations), the two or three months allotted to the internship was too short. Thus, it was advocated that an extension of time could be considered.

## IMPLICATIONS

### *Implications for Practice*

The internship program at Central University is one of the pillars of the department and should be continued, according to the students. However, the current structure requires some modification to make it much more effective. The university should reorganize the internship program to ensure that it looks for relevant placement opportunities for the students. It does not help to ask students to look for places for their internship on their own. In order to avoid frustrating its students, the university should sign Memorandum of Understanding with organizations that will, from time to time, open their doors to provide interns with workplace experience. Workplace supervisors should be identified and

trained by Central University internship office to administer the evaluation forms for consistency and fairness in awarding marks to the interns. The WIL should reflect a true partnership involving industry, the university and the student. It is therefore imperative that all three partners are engaged at various times to implement the internship. Requiring the students to arrange for their own placement with lecturers barely visiting students on-site cripples the partnership. The defect needs to be addressed. Placement is an important step towards the achievement of relevance of an internship experience. Therefore, it should not be left solely in the hands of the students. The university should be actively involved in screening and assigning students to organizations that are likely to make use of their specialty areas.

Organizations or departments where students' intern must provide relevant experiential exposure to the interns. It is untenable to have a situation where almost half (48%) of the 46 organizations where the students interned are not related to the core business of media and communication. Students should not be permitted to waste their time with organizations that may not be in a position to advance the professionalism of interns. Lecturers should screen and scrutinize the work experience an organization will provide its interns before they assign students.

It was obvious that some of the students had lost confidence in what they perceived to be an unfair assessment system by the university. The university needs to take a second look at the way it undertakes its assessment and grading. To this end, interns should be briefed on how to write their internship reports appropriately. Merely handing forms to students and expecting them to complete them satisfactorily may tend to favour some to the detriment of others because students operate at different intellectual levels.

Of particular concern is the duration of the internship. At the minimum, the university should explore the possibility of running the internship for an extended period to cover one full semester of practical training, instead of a mere eight-week workplace experience squeezed between semesters. It would be preferable if, over time, the university worked towards a system whereby each year students spend six months at the workplace and another six months at the university. This means that during the four-year duration of the degree program, students would spend two years at the university and two years at the workplace.

#### *Implication for Theory*

There is a gap in WIL studies in Africa. Most of the available literature comes from the west with Govender and Wait, (2017) indicating that "the gap in the literature indicates limited empirical research on what the benefits of WIL projects are, whether self-placement is successful, and whether students perceive WIL organizations as promoting their career prospects". Hopefully, this research therefore will add to the available body of knowledge from the African perspective. The research findings will help to redesign the internship program to the benefit of all the principal stakeholders, namely, the interns, the university and industry. Furthermore, the findings would help measure the relevance of the internship program in connection with relatedness and utility of the courses offered. This will inform the University about best practices for running the internship program.

#### LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study had some limitations including financial constraints which impacted the number of students engaged for the study. Also, most of the data was based on recall which could sometimes be diluted

due to time lapses and mental ineptitude. The study therefore suggests that future research must investigate a larger number of respondents and take a quantitative perspective.

## CONCLUSION

Students perceived the WIL experience at Central University as a worthwhile initiative, relevant to their future job roles although the time allocated to it, was considered inadequate for their skills development. Akin to this is the allocation of adequate human and financial resources for the implementation and monitoring of the internship. In this regard, it is important for the university to consider the establishment of a secretariat for WIL. That office will be made to cater for the placement, monitoring and evaluation of students.

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