

Navigating the Maze: Finding Placement for Industrial Attachment

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Abstract

This paper is based on a study that was carried out among university students with the aim of finding out how they got placement for industrial attachment (IA) which is commonly referred to as Field Attachment (FA). Students are normally prepared adequately through interactive sessions with the members of staff of a given department. It is assumed that these sessions equip the students with the basic knowledge needed while they are on attachment. Over the years, it has emerged that many students take longer to find placement than others. A number of students take more than a month before they get placed. In 2012, we carried out a questionnaire survey after trainees returned to the university from a two month industrial attachment. The questionnaire is organized into 15 thematic areas most of which had sub-categories. Two (2) themes sought demographic information and details about the firms where students were placed, 4 thematic items were open ended and 9 were Likert Scale type ranging from strongly agree (SA) to strongly disagree (SD) or very likely (VL) to very unlikely (VU) or very satisfied (VS) to very dissatisfied (VD). A total of 35 questionnaires were administered using convenience sampling method to the students who were available during data collection period. The findings of the study revealed that majority of the students (48%) found places by applying directly to firms of their choice. A number secured placement through friends (26%), 11% were non-committal on how they found attachment firms, 9% were assisted by their guardians or parents, 3% got attached to firms where they previously worked, and another 3% did not respond to the item. None of the respondents acknowledged any assistance from the teaching department (0%). Consequently, it is recommended that training institutions should find placements for their students before IA start date to save time spent by students visiting industries in search of places.

Keywords: *Trainees, Placement, Industrial Attachment (IA), Field Attachment (FA)*

Introduction

It is accepted globally that industrial attachment (IA) is a very important component in a learning system, particularly at tertiary and higher learning institutions. According to Osman, Omar, Kofli *et al.* (2008), preparation and exposure of students to industrial training is necessary in any professional education training programme. Industrial attachment provides opportunities for undergraduates to apply what they have learnt at the university, provides on-the-job training and real-life job experience, making them more employment ready (Rahman Omar, Kofli *et al.*, 2009; Pillai & Yusoff, 2007). It can be further argued that, IA is an extremely valuable component of university education, more so for professional courses (Bansal, Grover & Ashok, 2010).

This paper is based on a study that was carried out among trainees with the aim of finding out how they got institutions for industrial attachment (IA), which is commonly referred to as Field Attachment (FA) in a number of universities in Kenya. A study carried out in Ghana indicates very little involvement of the teaching departments in the placement of prospective trainees (Ayarkwa, Agyekum & Adinyira, 2012). At the University of Eldoret, where the study was carried out, and, particularly in the various teaching departments, students are normally prepared for IA through interactive sessions with their lecturers. In these sessions students are informed of what is expected of them while they are on attachment.

Over the years, it has been found that many students in various teaching departments take long to find placement. A number take more than a month before they get an acceptance letter from at least one of the institutions they applied to. This observation has been expressed in a study carried out by Donkor, Nsoh and Mitchual (2009). The observation is further reiterated in Edziwa and Chivheya (2013), in a study that focused on agricultural programmes. Edziwa and Chivheya (*ibid.*) report that students in agriculture inclined establishments experience difficulties finding places for IA. Similar observations are reported by Wallace, Murray and Overton (2009) who argued that students who independently search for placement without much help from their institutions are disadvantaged. Protocol demands that negotiations for placement (whether to accept trainees or not, how many and what period of the year) be conducted between institutions to avert the delays and frustrations that are experienced by the students.

Industrial Attachment Requirements

Globally, it is evident that most post-secondary training institutions require students to have work experience as a prerequisite for graduation. The details of the kind of experience expected of students depend on the program of study be it technology based programs (computer science, physics, engineering, food science, nutrition, agriculture, apparel and fashion design, statistics) or social science based, i.e. public administration, law, human resource development, sociology, social work, counselling and business administration among others. Despite the known differences between programmes, most institutions acknowledge that the IA experience is meant to facilitate the trainee to develop awareness on the requirements of the world of work prior to completion of a degree or any other post secondary certificate; enhance already acquired work related skills which include social skills, have a hands on experience with modern technology in whichever workplace a trainee serves, as well as make a personal connection between theory and practice (Mihail, 2006).

To the institutions receiving the trainees on IA, it is a time to look out for future employees particularly those with exemplary talents. Davis and Shirliff Company in Kenya in their *Notes for Guidance of Applicants* for IA paragraph 9 direct that: “attachment will be offered only once for a particular course but in very exceptional circumstances outstanding students will be given another chance in the duration of that course” (<http://www.dayliff.com/..... itemid=62>). This statement is an indication that a number of institutions are keen to retain the exemplary trainees in one way or another, and offering a second chance is a better option.

Evidently, training institutions place a lot of value on IA and use a variety of methods to communicate the essence to the students and the public which include potential employers. For example, in Kenya, a number of training institutions such as Management University of Africa Kirinyaga University College, Strathmore University, Ramogi Institute of Technology, Gusii Training Institute, Kenya Coast Polytechnic and Rift Valley Technical Training Institute among others have articulated the requirements on the World Wide Web (www). The details on the www are targeting both the stakeholders and the trainees. From what is available on the internet, it can be concluded that the middle level colleges put high value on the IA requirement. In this regard, the National Industrial Training Authority-Kenya (NITA) in its website states that its mission is to promote high standards in the quality and efficiency of industrial training in Kenya and to ensure an adequate supply of trained human resource. It is a requirement that all training firms in Kenya register with NITA (<http://www.nita.go.ke/>)

In the sub-Saharan region, it is also evident that IA is a requirement that is supported by governments. Take the examples of Rwanda and the Gambia. In 2011, Workforce Development Authority of Rwanda carried out a study whose objective was to improve on the job and employability skills of agricultural, veterinary and forestry laureates. The Authority also wanted to establish the conditions under which the internships are organized, identify constraints faced by the stakeholders and formulate proposals to improve the organization and monitoring of internships (Dodo & Soloviev, 2011). On the other hand, by 2003 the Gambia Government enacted laws that guide the establishment of training institutions and training requirements including IA (Republic of Gambia, 2003).

Similarly, and at both the international and local levels, universities and post secondary training institutions are clear on their expectations particularly the technology oriented programs. For example, the University of Dar-es-Salaam, like others in the region, has provided detailed information on the www. But what is worth noting is the way in which IA for the engineering students is organized. Unlike most Kenyan universities, in the University of Dar es Salaam trainees in the School of Engineering are placed in the industries for 3 years consecutively as explained in the paragraph below:

.... All first, second and third year students must successfully complete their Practical Training (PT) each year. The contents of training differ each year of study. In their first year, students work at craftsmen level. In their second and third year students work at technicians level and at junior engineers level respectively.
(www.ee.udsm.ac.tz/index.php/industrial-attachment)

The above example illustrates one of the ways training institutions plan and manage IA. The difference in management could be guided by the vision and mission of the institution as well as a chief executive officer's management style. Below is a description of three examples of institutions in Kenya. **Example 1:** Kirinyaga University College (KUC) in Kirinyaga County – Kenya. KUC has established a Department of Industrial Liaison whose role is to liaise with the industrial attachment stakeholders which includes “the trainees, the parents, Kenya Association of Technical Training Institutions (KATTI) Affiliates, National Industrial Training Authority (NITA), Kenya National Examination Council (KNEC) and all attachment providing ‘Industries’ ...”. (<http://www.kyuc.ac.ke/about-us/administration/industrial-liaison-department>)

Example 2: Rift Valley Technical Training Institute (RVTTI) is situated in Uasin Gishu County-Kenya. RVTTI like KUC has a well established Industrial Liaison Department charged with the responsibility of coordinating industrial attachment and assessment for all programs. The outlined activities are: (1) securing an appropriate insurance cover for all trainees; (2) liaising with industries on matters pertaining to training and placement of trainees; and (3) evaluation of students' while on IA (<http://rvti.ac.ke/oldsite/ilo.html>).

Example 3: Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT) is located in Kiambu County. JKUAT like the two institutions above has a post of Industrial Liaison Officer. But unlike the two institutions, the role of the Industrial Liaison Officer is to promote technology transfer and commercialization of the University inventions; hence the emphasis is on research outputs and related innovations. The officer's responsibilities include establishing and maintaining a channel through which organizations can access knowledge and inventions generated by JKUAT (<http://www.jkuat.ac.ke/2010/08/inaugural-university-industrial-liaison-officer/>).

On the regional scene, an example is Dar-es-Salaam Institute of Technology in Tanzania. The Institute like KUC and RVTTI has a Department of Industrial Liaison and Career Guidance whose main objective is to provide guidance for efficient and effective coordination of Industrial Practical Training (IPT), career counselling for the Institute's students, job placement and follow-up of Institute's graduates (<http://www.dit.ac.tz/ilo.htm>) into the work place.

A review of literature on various institutions some of which have been cited above reveals many similarities and also differences in focus. Whereas most institutions in Kenya and in the region are yet to claim a sustainable link with industry, older well established and renowned universities in the global North have 'a wide angle view' to university industrial linkage and not just IA. From the international scene the University of Saskatchewan in Canada is a case in point. At the University, the Industry Liaison Office is responsible for the commercialization of research and knowledge developed by the University's researchers. On the same note, the office's other mandate include fostering and developing sustainable collaborative work environments between researchers, industry partners and funding agencies (<http://www.usask.ca/research/ilo/whoweare.php>).

So far a discussion has been done of ways in which different training institutions in Kenya and beyond organize industrial attachment. The aim of this study was to find out how university students at the University of Eldoret secured placement for industrial attachment. In the next sections of the paper we discuss the research approach used, the results of the study and conclusions.

Materials and Methods

A questionnaire survey was carried out in September 2012. It was the beginning of the 2012/2013 academic year. Students had just returned to the University from a two month industrial attachment. The target population was the Bachelor of Education-Technology Education students who were in the third year of study. The first author met the students in a scheduled class session; he explained the objectives of the intended research and requested for volunteers. On the same note, he assured the participants of confidentiality to alleviate fears and to encourage honesty in whatever they chose to share with us as pertains to Industrial Attachment (IA).

The self-administered questionnaire was organized into 15 thematic areas most of which had sub-categories. Two (2) themes sought demographic information and details about the firms where students were placed, 4 thematic items were open ended and 9 were Likert Scale type ranging from strongly agree (SA) to strongly disagree (SD) or very likely (VL) to very unlikely (VU) or very satisfied (VS) to very dissatisfied (VD).

A total of 35 questionnaires were administered using convenience sampling method. The 35 respondents (N=66, n=35) are the students who were readily available and who agreed to participate in the study when the questionnaires were being administered in the scheduled class session. The author chose to administer the questionnaires in a scheduled class session instead of giving students to take home and return the following day in order to avoid a situation where respondents would discuss their views. Data was cleaned and coded manually, descriptive statistics used to analyze the data.

Results and Discussions

Target Population

Sixty-six students (N=66) were expected to attend the scheduled class session where the questionnaires were administered. These would have been 45 (68%) male and 21(32%) female. However, only 35(53%) students attended that session comprising of 29% female (10) and 71% male (25), with a variation of -3% and +3% respectively.

Finding Placement

Figure 1 below illustrates that majority of the students (48%) found placement by applying directly to organizations of their choice. A number secured placement through friends (26%), 9% reported having been assisted by their guardians or parents, 3% got attached to organizations where they previously worked, 11% were non-committal on how they found firms for attachment and another 3% did not respond to this specific item at all. None of the respondents acknowledged any assistance from the teaching department (0%). These results indicate that the teaching department was not involved in the placement of students in any memorable way. The authors' observation over the last 6 years shows that the only role played by the teaching department is that of issuing introductory letters to trainees explaining who the student is to the prospective organizations. With a letter in their hands, the students find ways of 'navigating the maze'. A number of respondents reported encountering a few rejections or regrets before landing on a favourable response. The process as reported by the respondents therefore was time consuming; and at times frustrating for those who did not have social networks who could solicit the placement on their behalf.

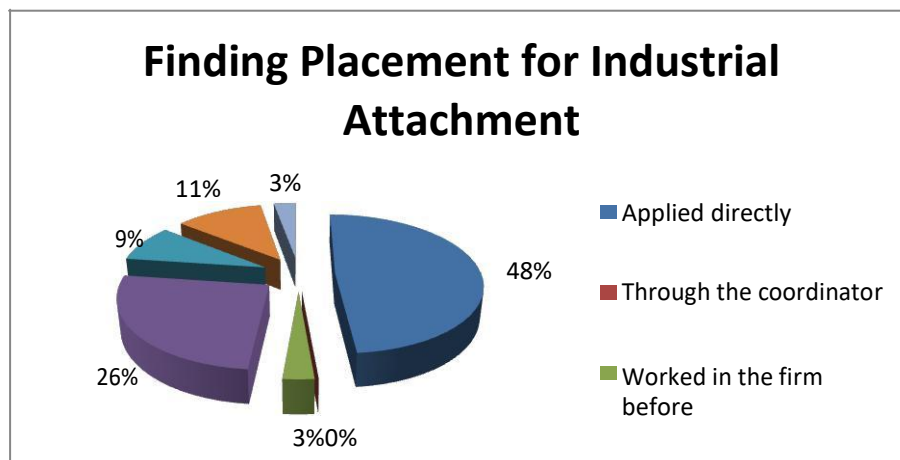


Figure 1. Finding placement for industrial attachment

Students' Suggestions

Through one of the open ended items in the questionnaire, we sought to find out ways in which the respondents would like Industrial Attachment improved in the future. As shown in Figure 2, 11(31%) of the respondents suggested that the teaching department should find placement for students going for Industrial Attachment (IA). A similar recommendation was reported in a study by Ayarkwa *et al.* (2012) and Matamande *et al.* (2013). The respondents in both studies emphasize that the teaching departments should take up the responsibility of contacting the relevant organizations and placing students accordingly. Wallace *et al.* (2009) has convincingly pointed out the benefits of having a liaison office as opposed to students rushing from industry to industry in search of placement.

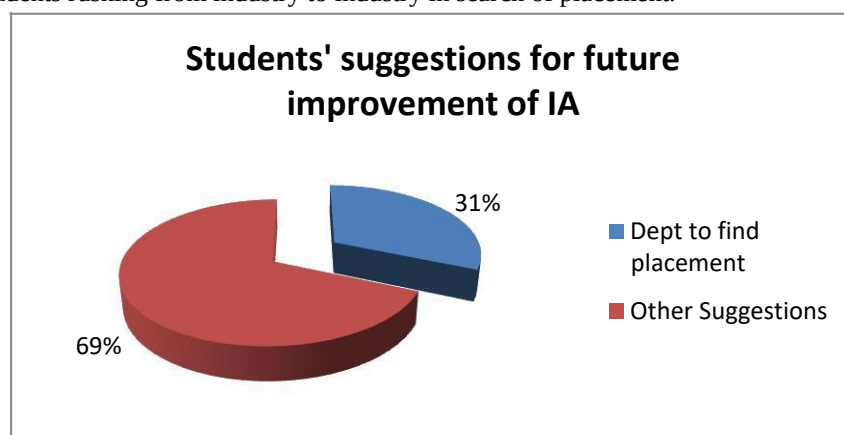


Figure 2. Students Suggestions for future improvement of industrial attachment

On the same item, 24(69%) of the respondents gave varied suggestions for future improvement of Industrial Attachment, which comprised of issues touching on student assessment during IA; need for

organizations benefiting from student placement to give stipend to trainees; and ways in which organizations treat trainees among others.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the contributions from the respondents and the authors' experience and observations, being members of teaching departments at the University of Eldoret, it is crucial to emphasize that finding placement for industrial attachment by the trainees is like navigating a maze. It is stressful and time wasting as trainees travel from one firm to another, and at times from one town to the next. A number of students are exploited in the process. As the students hustle for placement, the industrial attachment coordinator at whichever department could be impatiently wondering why the student is taking too long to identify a firm. *Navigating the maze* is a costly experience to all students. It was also observed that a number of students do not find placement despite the many days spent moving from place to place. In such a case a student postpones the exercise to another year, which is a great inconvenience and an opportunity cost.

The widely accepted aims of integrating industrial attachment in training programmes are to facilitate the trainee to: (i) Develop awareness on the requirements of the world of work, (ii) Enhance already acquired work related skills which include social skills, (iii) Provide a hands on experience with modern technology that may not be available in the training institutions, and (iv) Make a personal connection between theory and practice. These objectives cannot be achieved unless training institutions review the ways in which IA is planned and managed, and on the basis of this, we recommend that: training institutions should establish a position of industrial liaison officer whose responsibility would be to: (i) Establish sustainable linkages between the university and the firms to bridge the gap between the academia and the prospective employers, (ii) coordinate placement of students with the teaching departments. This includes soliciting for placement vacancies in the various firms and (iii) ensure quality of the operations of industrial attachment for the benefit of all stakeholders.

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