

**University of Economics - University of
Danang's Adoption of Foreign Internship
Course: Motivations and Lessons**

Donald J. Kopka Jr.*
College of Business and Economics, Towson University,
U.S.A.

Doan Thi Lien Huong
University of Danang, University of Economics, Vietnam

Nguyen Liem
University of Danang, University of Economics, Vietnam

— *Review of* —
**Integrative
Business &
Economics**
— *Research* —

ABSTRACT

The University of Economics - University of Danang's (UE-UD) adoption of an internship course from an American university, Towson University in Maryland, provides an example of the challenges in implementing educational programs from foreign universities. The course was adopted in the UE-UD's Department of Business Administration and sought to give students more practical work experience rather than have them write the traditional company report. The adoption was complicated because the skill development orientation from the foreign university was not well connected to the internship work assignments. Local Danang employers also lacked an understanding of the new approach and needed more communication and guidance from the Department on how to supervise the internships. The adopted course was conducted online and lacked the skill development activities of regular in-person class meetings. Adoption of the foreign internship course was important for making the course more comparable to western skill development pedagogies, but its development and implementation would have benefited from closer consultation and advice from the foreign university on the full content of the course.

Keywords: Adopting foreign courses, internships

1. EDUCATIONAL GLOBALIZATION IN VIETNAM

In 1986, the Vietnamese government adopted and has continued to implement its Doi Moi – Renovation – program to develop the Vietnamese economy and improve infrastructure, education, social and other services (Pham 2011). Higher education has been included in these developments with a strong focus on faculty development that will enable educational programs to rise to the level of international universities (Nguyen, n.d. and Vietnam & U.S. Higher Education 2010). At the University of Danang, University of Economics (UE-UD), this focus involves sending faculty abroad for masters and doctoral degrees, administrative and faculty training visits to foreign universities, cooperative educational relationships for students with foreign universities, adoption of foreign language textbooks and course structures, and heavy reliance on the internet for research and teaching information.

This paper considers a major course change in UE-UD that seeks to provide an internship course experience comparable to that in an American university. Through a focus group and follow-up individual faculty discussions, the authors review the adoption and implementation of an internship course modeled after the internship course in the College of Business and Economics (CBE) at Towson University. This review considers the longstanding internship requirement at the University of Danang, CBE's Professional Experience internship course, UE-UD's development of the adopted Towson internship course, employer participation in the adopted course, positive results from the course change, and needed improvements.

2. LONGSTANDING DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION INTERNSHIP REQUIREMENT

UE-UD is one of eight colleges in the University of Danang and has more than 22,000 undergraduate and graduate students. The Department of Business Administration had more than 3,000 students, and included courses in finance, economics, management, marketing, operations, and strategy. In 2014, the Department was reorganized into separate departments of marketing, financial management, and business administration. Prior to the reorganization, internships in the Department of Business Administration involved students writing a report on a company. The reports were prepared under the direction of individual faculty members and could be several hundred pages in length. The reports typically covered the history of the company, its organization, management, products, customers, and identification of problems and potential solutions. At the end of each semester, a supervising faculty would have stacks of twenty, thirty, forty, or more student internship reports to read and grade.

These reports had the characteristics of business case studies. The internships themselves lacked the practical work experience associated with internships at Towson or other American universities. It could be said that the Department of Business Administration students learned about a company but not how to do work at that or any other company. They were learning about a company but not learning and doing workplace skills. Beginning in 2014, the UE-UD Departments of Business Administration, Marketing, and Financial Management started to offer an internship course modeled after Towson University's College of Business and Economics Professional Experience internship course. The adopted course gives students the opportunity to have practical work experience in the internship position. It is offered as an alternative to the continuing company report, case study internship.

3. COLLEGE OF BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS (CBE) PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE COURSE AS MODEL

The Professional Experience internship course in CBE arose from a restructuring of the college's curriculum during the 1995-96 academic year. The course was added to the curriculum because of a recognition that employers wanted to see and hire graduating college students who had actual professional work experience (Scott 2013). Business students graduating from CBE and many other colleges in the United States have typically worked their way through college as restaurant servers, retail employees, delivery services, factory or other work. While such jobs enable students to support their college expenses, they do not provide the type of work experience associated with

managing people and a facility, representing companies in sales relationships, or providing financial investment advice to clients. The college jobs are not the business jobs that students seek and get after graduation. The Professional Experience course, through its required internship plus other course activities, is intended to prepare students to assume professional work responsibilities. It is focused on enabling students to make the “transition from school to work,” a term commonly applied to the career support American universities try to provide to their graduates (Olson 2014).

The adoption of the course in 1996 was subject to criticism from some faculty in CBE. They saw it as an unnecessary addition to the curriculum and that students could learn workplace skills on the job. There was no reason for the college to be having a required course to provide such skills. They also viewed the course as taking time away from teaching business subject matter. An additional concern was how the internships would be found because 300 or more internships would be required every semester. They were worried that the university would not be able to find that many internships, and that they, the faculty, would have to find the internships.

Despite these faculty reservations, the Professional Experience course was adopted and was offered beginning in summer 1998. The course has a specific focus on fulfilling several of the Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes (KSAs) that were adopted as part of the curriculum revision. In total, there were originally forty-nine KSAs subsequently reduced to twenty, with the Professional Experience course focusing on two: KSA#18 Show evidence of a quality, mentored, reflective professional experience; and KSA#19 Demonstrate effective job search; career portfolio, résumé and interview skills. The nine broad categories of these KSAs are: Accredited Business Content, Communication, Thinking: Critical and Creative, Technology, Leadership and Teamwork, Ethics and Values, Attitudes and Practical Excellence, and Employability.

The organization of the course was unsettled during the first several years. There was no suitable textbook, different sections with different teachers had different requirements and content, there was no clear plan for content in the course, and there was an overall lack of consistency. To resolve this uncertainty, the course faculty participated in a workshop in December 2000. Through that workshop they decided to adopt Steven Covey’s *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989) as the textbook through all sections of the course. While it seemed simplistic, one major reason for the book’s adoption was that it consists of seven chapters. Since the course has seven meetings, every other week over a fifteen week semester, one chapter would be the focus for each class session. Another reason for using *Seven Habits* is that it is a widely recognized life guide that has proved very influential. Many business professionals attend training programs to learn how to apply Covey Seven Habits.

The workshop brought coherence to the course. The *Seven Habits* book helped to organize the course, and it also served as the basis for one of the course assignments. One course requirement is the submission of four reflective journals that have students write about their internship experience in terms of what they are doing, what they are learning, and how they are applying the *Seven Habits* in their work. For example, Habit 3 is “Put First Things First,” and the associated reflective journal requires the students to reflect and write about how they have been planning to ensure they are doing the right things in work and life.

In addition to the four reflective journals, the students must attend all seven class meeting, they must prepare a portfolio that was originally submitted in a binder but is now submitted online, and they submit a supervisor evaluation of their work

performance. Another requirement is a learning plan that the students prepare at the beginning of the semester. This involves each student self-assessing their level of performance on each KSA, and then selecting three KSAs that they will concentrate on learning and improving during the course of the internship. They then report an end-of-course KSA self-assessment that focuses especially on how they have improved on each of the three KSAs that they selected. The learning plan resembles the kind of development plans that professionals typically follow on a yearly basis. Mandatory class attendance is used for discussions of the work experiences and what they are learning, and to get suggestions for improving the work experience. The course instructors also invite outside guest speakers on topics of interest to students, such as job search methods, professional etiquette, investment planning, and alumni discussing post-graduation work adjustments.

4. DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION MOTIVATIONS TO ADOPT CBE INTERNSHIP COURSE

There were several motivations for UE-UD's Department of Business Administration to adopt the CBE internship course. One factor was their exposure to the course through a cooperative agreement with CBE. First author Donald Kopka completed a Fulbright Scholar position in the Department in 2004. A product of that work was the development of a program for UE-UD business students to study at UE-UD and then transfer to CBE in the United States to earn a degree from an American university, Towson. Part of this program requires the students to return and complete the internship course in Danang, which Dr. Kopka has taught in Danang since 2010. Offering the Professional Experience course in Danang for the Towson-Danang students exposed both Drs. Lien Huong and Liem to the Towson/American internship approach. Dr. Lien Huong became especially knowledgeable since for three years she coordinated the Towson-Danang program for UE-UD. As the coordinator, she collaborated with Dr. Kopka from a distance to identify suitable internship sponsoring firms, translate the employer evaluation form from English into Vietnamese, and schedule courses. This collaboration made her very familiar with the course's requirements and objectives, and she proposed to Dr. Liem, then chairperson of the Department of Business Administration, to adopt the CBE approach to internships.

There were other factors that also led to the adoption of the CBE Professional Experience course in UE-UD. Dr. Liem and other faculty recognized that the existing internship that required students to write the equivalent of a case study about a company was an application of theory to practical problems, but it did not lead to actual practice of the theory. Students were not doing work that improved their skills. In addition, the case studies were often available over many years, so that students could readily copy previous work and not have to do think through and organize, prepare, and write an original report of their own. The solution to both of these recognized problems was to focus more on the type of internship experience of the CBE Professional Experience course.

5. DEVELOPMENT OF UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS ADOPTED INTERNSHIP COURSE

The initial development of the course in the Department of Business Administration seemed to involve high adoption of the CBE Professional Experience course and was oriented to developing the students' KSAs. Students were required to develop a personal plan according to the KSAs, similar to the learning plans required in CBE. However, the early experiences seemed to reveal that students were not highly motivated to overcome limitations they may have identified in their KSA self-assessments. Further, the internship positions often did not facilitate pursuing development of the students' self-assessed KSAs. Instead, they had to select KSAs that could be accomplished in the job, even if the KSA was not what their self-assessments indicated they should work to improve. Overall, the development of the course at UE-UD seemed to entail an adoption of the CBE course, and then a "learning by doing" approach where the course was adapted and changed according to the experiences of teachers and students with the course.

6. SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN UE-UD AND CBE INTERNSHIP COURSES

The course as offered in UE-UD bears some similarities to CBE's Professional Experience course. It is providing the students with direct work experience. It also gives some consideration to KSAs to guide students' learning through the internship experience. They do develop a portfolio that is submitted for grading along with a supervisor's evaluation. There are also some notable differences. There are no regular class meetings; interactions between students and faculty is done through an e-learning system. The absence of class meetings also means that guest speakers are not used as resources from whom students and faculty can learn. The lack of face-to-face class meetings may also prevent the kind of student discussions that can facilitate their learning and skill development.

7. CHALLENGES OF EMPLOYER PARTICIPATION IN ADOPTED INTERNSHIP COURSE

Employer participation in the adopted internship course has posed a number of challenges. Employers over many years had become familiar with the case type of internship where students write a report describing a company, its environment, customers, and challenges. Having students do actual work while under their supervision was very new to them, so there was uncertainty about assigning students work responsibilities and then evaluating that work. A major concern among the teaching faculty is that in a culture of interpersonal relations, supervisors may give evaluations that are not completely honest: that is, they give unjustifiably good evaluations because of connections with a student's family. There have also been problems with poorly performing students whose unsatisfactory work can damage relationships between the employer and UE-UD.

Recruiting employers for this new internship approach has had several obstacles. There is no career center in UE-UD so there is no data base or listing of potential internship sponsors for students to use to arrange an internship. The lack of a career center indicates a lack of outreach and contact efforts to develop broader connections with employers, let alone potential internship opportunities. Another obstacle to

recruiting employers is that faculty have limited contacts with businesses in order to arrange internships.

8. POSITIVE RESULTS FROM ADOPTION OF TOWSON CBE INTERNSHIP COURSE

The internship adoption led to several positive results. A major benefit was achieving a primary reason for adopting the CBE internship course, giving the students practical work experience. It also increased the interactions between businesses and the university. This led to some companies becoming more interested and supportive of the new internship approach. The internships also opened opportunities for students to get good jobs if they performed well. There were an increased number of job offers as a result of the internships. The adopted course had a good fit with the university by enabling more integration with businesses. Students doing the internships could provide quality feedback on employers who would be suitable for future internships. The internships also increased faculty knowledge by increasing their awareness of the skills that employers are seeking. Faculty can move beyond theory to give insight to students on skills and practices that they should be able to perform in future jobs.

9. NEEDED IMPROVEMENTS FOR ADOPTED TOWSON CBE INTERNSHIP COURSE

UE-UD's experience with adopting the CBE Professional Experience course shows a lot of "learning by doing." Aspects of course design and content were changed when they did not operate effectively. While changes were made along the way, there are a number of improvements that faculty view as still needing improvement. A major limitation is an absence of a career center at UE-UD that can identify internship opportunities, develop and maintain an employer data base, and provide other career services to students. A data base for internship opportunities is especially important as more than 3000 students, ten times the number in CBE, complete an internship every semester. The establishment of a career center requires more support from the university, which has provided limited support to this change in the internship program. At the university level, the curriculum design needs to be more flexible to enable better timing of the internship. Students really should take the internship no later than the seventh semester of their course program. There is also the challenge of extending professional experience internships across the college. At present, only three departments are offering such internships, so more cooperation is needed across the university and individual departments to encourage adoption.

There are several other challenges. One concern is that students presently have a choice between a professional experience internship or the longstanding case-type internship. Faculty are concerned that students may choose a professional experience internship because it will be less work than the case-type. The two types of internships can also cause confusion within companies as they have students doing both type of internships. The company managers may be uncertain how to supervise or evaluate either type because of the differences. The internship positions themselves can be problematic. The positions often have little connection to their major. There are often clear positions for marketing work, but are far less clear for students in other areas. The positions can also be difficult to arrange because Vietnamese businesses are often very

secretive about internal operations. This can mean that job descriptions are difficult to obtain. Job descriptions are also difficult to obtain because companies are not used to this type of internship so they cannot give precise specifics of the work. Faculty members' limited connections with business can inhibit their ability to teach students so they become better performing in the internship positions. All these challenges point to a need for better, increased communication with employers to better understand their business environment and work with the employers to identify, describe, and supervise the internships.

10. CBE PERSPECTIVE ON UE-UD ADOPTION OF PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE COURSE

As a final assessment of UE-UD's adoption of the Professional Experience course at CBE, first author Dr. Donald Kopka can offer a CBE perspective. Dr. Kopka directed the course from 1999 to 2003, and he led the workshop in 2000 that changed the organization of the CBE Professional Experience course. He has also taught the course in Danang during the summer from 2010 to the present, ending in 2016 with the end of the Towson-Danang program. Dr. Kopka brings an experienced perspective that can offer insights on UE-UD's adoption. His insights can suggest what should be expected and what can be done by others in order to adopt such courses from foreign universities.

Dr. Kopka is not surprised by some of the challenges that faculty in the Department of Business Administration encountered. As discussed previously, CBE's Professional Experience course lacked structure and focus until the faculty worked through the problems during a workshop that set an organization that is still used sixteen years later. There was a lot of "learning by doing" in CBE, so such struggles should be expected. Somewhat more surprising was the Department of Business Administration's adoption of the Professional Experience course. What is done in CBE is quite different that how internships had historically been done in the Department, so the change was a substantial departure from the previous coursework. But the adoption was also not surprising since foreign models are often adopted in different organizations in order to follow what appears to be a better approach.

The adoption process is where Dr. Kopka's insights may be most useful, not as criticisms, but as guidance for more effective implementation. When he learned about Dr. Lien Huong's proposal to Dr. Liem to adopt the CBE course, he was very impressed with their readiness to take a path away from the past and more in the direction of internship programs in the United States and other developed countries. His learning about its implementation is where some important guidance can be given. First, it would have been beneficial to have consulted more closely with him about the course content and requirements. It seems they followed the CBE course on the basis of syllabi, assignment directions, and other documents and experiences that they possessed. Discussions with him might have helped determine the suitability of some of their approaches. A surprise for Dr. Kopka was learning that they had students develop their internships around the KSAs. When these were adopted in 1996, there was much controversy and dissatisfaction, especially among senior CBE faculty. It was not an easy task at Towson. The concept of KSAs must have been very new and unlike any ideas that students or faculty had previously encountered in courses in UE-UD. He also would have brought attention to resource requirements such as the need for a career

center to develop relationships with businesses and internships positions. The resource requirements would extend to faculty teaching the course to better prepare them for teaching such a course.

Other important points to consider would be the need to educate employers on the new internship approach. Special attention would need to be given to supervisors' assigning and evaluating work for the student interns. The class itself was far different from the CBE course that involved bi-weekly meetings and discussions. Conducting the course through e-learning may prevent students from having the kind of conversations that can be best accomplished through class meetings. Guest speakers may not be typical for courses in Vietnam, but they can prove highly beneficial for informing students about important topics for their future.

Overall, the UE-UD faculty have taken important steps to making their college's curriculum more relevant for students' development. The experience might have been more effective if they had a more complete understanding of all that was required for the adopted internship course.

REFERENCES

- [1] Covey, S. R. (1989), *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, New York: A Fireside Book Published by Simon & Schuster.
- [2] Nguyen, T. A. (n.d.), "Internationalization of Higher Education in Vietnam: The case study of Vietnam National University, Hanoi", Waseda University, Japan. Retrieved from http://www.waseda-giari.jp/sysimg/rresults/459_resume_2-3c_nguyen_thuy_anh.pdf
- [3] Olson, J. S. (Fall 2014), "Transitions From Formal Education to the Workplace", *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 143, 73-82.
- [4] Pham, T. H. T. (Summer 2011), "Doi Moi (Renovation) and Higher Education Reform in Vietnam", *International Journal of Educational Reform*, 20, Issue 3, 210-225.
- [5] Scott, A. (March 4, 2013), "Internships Become the New Job Requirement", *Marketplace*, Retrieved from: <http://www.marketplace.org/2013/03/04/education/internships-become-new-job-requirement>
- [6] "Vietnam & US Higher Education Internationalization Strategies: The University of Missouri Vietnam Institute" (December 20, 2010), Retrieved from <http://markashwill.com/2010/12/20/vietnam-us-higher-education-internationalization-strategies-the-university-of-missouri-vietnam-institute/>