

INTERNATIONAL INTERNSHIP IN CAMBODIA: A CASE STUDY OF KOREAN STUDENTS

Introduction

International student mobility has always been a feature of higher education internationalisation. The share of international student enrolment to total global higher education enrolment has hovered between 2 percent and 3 percent since the 1980s, but international tertiary student numbers have increased exponentially, quintupling from 0.8 million in 1980 to over 5 million in 2018, and are predicted to reach 8 million by 2025 (OECD 2017, Dennis, 2018). Latest official data (IIE 2019) shows that the top destination countries for international students are all developed countries, except for China that has recently risen to third place (Figure 1).

However, little is known about international student mobility from developed to developing countries or between developing countries – trends that have long existed but are only now gaining public and scholarly attention. Even so, the focus is on mobility from less developed countries to more economically advanced countries with better equipped higher education systems (Knight 2014; Jiani 2016). The reverse trend of student mobility from advanced countries with a better higher education system to less developed ones remains in the margins of discussion.

Also, while international degree mobility has been the centre of attention, non-degree mobility such as for internship programs, visiting and exchange schemes has barely been discussed. To contribute to the growing debate on these topics, this paper examines the internship experience of South Korean students at the Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI). It begins with the study's conceptual framework and methodology, followed by discussion of the findings. It concludes with recommendations for policy and practice, and future research directions on international student internship.

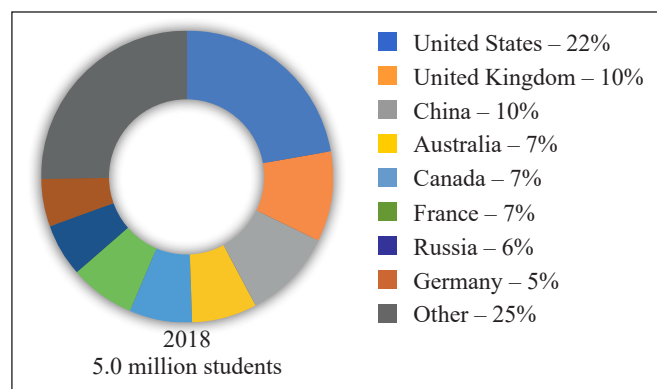
Prepared by Kang SoHyeon and Song Dabin, interns from South Korea, Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI), CDRI and Leng Phirom, director of Kirirom Institute of Technology. Citation: Kang SoHyeon, Song Dabin and Leng Phirom. 2020. "International Internship in Cambodia: A Case Study of Korean Students." *Cambodia Development Review* 24 (2): 7–11.

Conceptual framework

One way of looking at international internship experience is to adopt the framework of employee job satisfaction. For instance, Rothman's (2003) qualitative study on the internship experiences of business school students identified three factors affecting satisfaction: job-related, organisational and interpersonal aspects. Based on this model, D'Abate, Youndt and Wenzel (2009) developed a more comprehensive model to empirically evaluate internship programs, including job characteristics, work environment and contextual factors. Job characteristics cover skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback. Work environment characteristics include learning opportunities, supervisory support, career development opportunities, co-worker support and organisation satisfaction. The contextual aspects considered include flexible working, reasonable commute, paid versus unpaid, pay satisfaction and desirable location.

Still, there are some points that D'Abate et al. (2009) might have missed, notably individual factors and university support. Heng et al. (2011) identified three individual factors as important aspects of an effective internship program: academic preparedness, positive attitude and self-initiative. They also focused on university support, which entails linkage between the university and external institutions, with appropriate supervisors appointed by the university to provide academic guidance

Figure 1: Top destination countries for international students in 2018



Source: Project Atlas (IIE 2019)

Table 1: Factors influencing internship satisfaction at CDRI

Factor	Examples
Individual characteristics	academic preparedness, positive attitude, self-initiative
Job characteristics	skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, feedback, task clarity
Organisational environment	supervisors, co-workers, learning opportunities, professional development programs, administrative support, flexible working, pay satisfaction
Contextual	travelling, safety, local culture, local people's attitude towards outsiders

Sources: D'Abate, Youndt and Wenzel 2009; Heng et al. 2011

and one-to-one support to distance learners when emergencies or problems arise (Fagan and Wise 2007). Further, Heng et al. (2011) expanded the term “work environment characteristics” to “organisational environment” which includes supervisors, co-workers, task clarity, learning and development opportunities.

Next, what is the impact of mentorship on international interns? Feldman, Folks and Turnley (1999) suggested three types of outcome, based on previous studies. First, mentoring can lead to the organisational socialisation of new recruits or interns (Louis, Posner and Powell 1983). Two key dimensions of this process are task initiation (which may lead to task mastery) and group initiation (or inclusion). Second, the mentoring of interns on international assignments can lead to greater learning about what life as an expatriate is like and a deeper understanding of the opportunities and challenges of living in a different culture (Feldman and Thomas 1992). Third, mentoring can have positive employment outcomes, with interns receiving (and accepting) job offers from their internship or a related employer as a result of their internship experiences (Taylor 1985, 1988). From this, we argue that interns who experience successful mentorship relationships are likely to have more positive internship outcomes than those who experienced failed mentorship relationships. Table 1 summarises the framework used for understanding the experience of South Korean interns at CDRI.

Table 2: List of participants

Participant	Position
PA	research intern
PB	research intern
PC	research intern
PD	research intern
PE	research intern
PF	research intern
PG	senior researcher
PH	senior administrator

Methodology

This study follows a qualitative research approach. Interviews and personal reflections were the primary methods of data collection used to gain a deep understanding of the motivations and experiences of South Korean interns at CDRI. Interviews were conducted in two phases: first with four interns who worked at CDRI from August 2017 to January 2018; and then with two interns who worked at CDRI between August 2018 and January 2019, as well as with two CDRI staff purposefully selected based on their experience and involvement in the internship program. The interviews with CDRI staff provided overall context for the duration of the internship programs. Data was analysed within the framework of four factors of internship satisfaction (see Table 1). To secure the anonymity and confidentiality of participants, we use the pseudonyms shown in Table 2 in the analysis.

It is important to acknowledge the benefits and biases of the study given that three of the study participants (two interns and their mentor) authored this paper. As insider researchers, we already had an intimate understanding of the organisational culture at CDRI and were able to communicate with other study participants quickly and conveniently. Also, we could incorporate our own perspectives in the conceptual framework. On the other hand, we brought certain biases to the study, especially our interpretation of the findings. That said, the fact that one of the authors is an experienced researcher ensured rigorous research methodology and good research practice throughout the study.

Case study of international interns at CDRI

The internship program

As part of its capacity building program, CDRI provides opportunities for national and international early career researchers, including university students and fresh graduates to gain research and administrative experience through mentor-protégé programs. In addition, the international internship program enables CDRI to establish research collaborations with international institutions, and encourages the exchange of ideas, experience and expertise with local researchers and students (interview with PG, 12 Dec 2018).

In the mentor-protégé program, in principle, each intern is assigned to work closely with one senior researcher. At the time of study, the Education Unit followed the mentor-protégé program as a policy more strictly than other research units. Overall, in the past six years, CDRI hosted an average of 17 interns a year, amounting to a total of 95 by 2018. Twenty-four of them were international students from 10 countries, namely Australia, Canada, France, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, Sweden, Thailand, the UK and the US. The duration of their internships ranged from three to twelve months.

Internship experience

At the end of their internships, all six interns expressed satisfaction with their experience, citing three key factors. One is related to practical experience in research and administrative roles, and exposure to current developments in the country. Related to job characteristics, they were engaged in all aspects of the research cycle, from conceptualisation and research design to fieldwork, data collection and analysis, dissemination of findings and report writing.

We are all undergraduate students and we need to follow the college curriculum, including taking courses and lectures that we're not really interested in. Hence, the experience at CDRI is a big catalyst to design our future. The knowledge [gained] from lectures is bookish. We cannot practically apply that great knowledge but we can use what we have learned from our internship at CDRI. To conduct research and to write our own research paper, we have to use a lot of general and in-depth knowledge about the issue, more than what is taught in school. (Interview with PA, 13 Oct 2017)

Second, the interns were also impressed with the atmosphere at CDRI, which relates to individual factors, job characteristics and organisational environment. In particular, they noted the collegiality and friendliness of CDRI staff, the autonomous and creative workplace culture, and the idea of learning by doing (i.e. from trial and error). One intern mentioned how the workplace culture meant they could perform well and productively, whereas many companies in South Korea have strict and inflexible workplace rules. Moreover, the interns expressed satisfaction with CDRI's mentor-protégé program. They said they had learned a lot from their internship, ranging from research skills to the importance of sociocultural understanding. To quote one of them:

I'm working here as an employee but at the same time I'm a university student. That means we still have supervisors from school and can get advice from them. We can work and learn simultaneously, like pre-service training. (Interview with PD, 1 Oct 2018)

Four of the interns emphasised that the internship meant they could learn how to conduct research, from reviewing the literature to writing reports, even on topics related to their field. One intern said that academic research is one of the best aspects of their studies and wanted to pursue professional research beyond the level of university. Another intern citing research and writing as weaknesses was hoping to improve their writing skills through internship at CDRI. To sum up, for a variety of reasons, the interns were attracted to the idea of doing research at CDRI. Furthermore, the opportunity to take part in practical research activities such as field visits and data collection was an added motivation.

All six interns reported that their internship at CDRI had broadened their cultural understanding of Cambodia. It was an enriching experience for those majoring in international studies because they had obtained some different insights by observing international phenomena from a different cultural perspective. Having an objective perspective is a positive attribute in most disciplines and professions. By immersing themselves in a different culture, they could acquire hands-on experience and broaden their insights. This will prepare them for a future career in international development.

Importantly, the outcome of broadening cultural knowledge benefits both international interns and local interns and junior researchers. This was raised by a CDRI researcher, who mentioned that local researchers, especially early-career researchers who have little or no exposure to foreign countries, can experience different cultures by working and socialising with international interns (interview with PG, 9 Jan 2019).

At the end of the interview, all interns said that if they could make the internship decision again, they would still choose CDRI, with practical research experience and the workplace atmosphere being the key factors. From this, we can conclude that interns' positive experiences were driven by job characteristics and organisational environment. The positive experiences reported across two different intern cohorts suggest the consistent success of CDRI's mentor-protégé program and the strong relationship between CDRI and its South Korean counterpart:

A CDRI researcher presented [a paper] at a conference held some time ago by Chonbuk National University and KAIDEC.¹ At that time, the researcher met a professor from Chonbuk and they had a conversation about CDRI's international internship program. From this, the professor visited CDRI and asked the institute to host some of his students as interns. Over the years, the professor has built strong trust in the quality and programs of CDRI and now sends three or four of his students every year to spend around six months at CDRI as interns. (Interview with PG, 9 Jan 2019)

The above comment suggests the role of human agency in international collaborative activities between CDRI and Chonbuk National University.

As well as positive experiences, many interns talked about their negative experiences during their stay in Cambodia, including air pollution and the unorganised public transport system – related to contextual factors. They also mentioned the language barrier, as none of them could speak Khmer. Even at CDRI where English is used as the working language, many activities, including fieldwork require basic Khmer language skills.

One intern suggested that CDRI organise Khmer language lessons to support international interns, and several interns regretted not having studied Khmer before coming to Cambodia. Participant PH suggested it would be helpful for interns if they could learn some everyday words and phrases in Khmer and acquaint themselves with Cambodian culture and history as part of their preparation for internship.

Also worth mentioning is the mentorship program itself. Although many of the interns were satisfied with the program, one intern reported not having enough initial mentoring from their mentor, inferring that program content varies depending on the mentor and the projects they are engaged in. Another intern said that the mentee-mentor relationship was interrupted by the mentor's assignment on an international research exchange.

Conclusion

This paper gives insights into the internship experience of South Korean students at CDRI. Experience of a different culture, a broader outlook for regional developments, and deeper understanding of intellectual life are the main positive outcomes from their international internship experience. Proper guidance through the mentor-protégé program, and the innovative work environment, added to their positive experience. From this, we can conclude that the institutional mentor-protégé program should be extended across CDRI to strengthen and improve the quality of its internship program, and ultimately its international reputation. Other Cambodian institutions could learn from CDRI's successful experience of running mentor-protégé programs for international interns.

It would be mutually beneficial for CDRI to organise Khmer language classes for international interns. Doing so would maximise their scholarly and social engagement as well as their meaningful contribution to CDRI's research work. Overall, internship is not simply about dispatching students abroad without proper understanding of the host country's or institutional culture and background. Strong human connections and trust are also key to establishing and sustaining an international internship program, as in the case of South Korean interns at CDRI.

¹ KAIDAC stands for Korea Association of International Development and Cooperation.

This case study was limited to six Korean interns at CDRI. So it is hard to generalise these findings to other international interns at CDRI let alone to international student mobility per se. And given that two of the authors are insider researchers, the findings should be treated with caution. Another limitation of this study is that the interviews were conducted in two phases over different time periods. Future studies should consider these points and take a comparative approach by exploring the experiences of international interns from other countries.

Plus, CDRI is unique, being established in 2000 under Anukret 94 as an independent non-profit policy research institute and recognised by the Cambodian government as providing services to enhance human resource development in the country and undertaking research and analysis to inform development policy and strategy. Hence, CDRI has a long tradition of hosting international scholars and interns, and a good reputation locally, regionally and internationally for research excellence. It would therefore be interesting to look at international internship programs at other Cambodian research and non-research institutes.

References

- Creswell, John W. 2007. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. 3rd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- D'Abate, Caroline P., Mark A. Youndt and Kathryn E. Wenzel. 2009. "Making the Most of an Internship: An Empirical Study of Internship Satisfaction." *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 8 (4): 527–539.
- Fagan, Thomas K., and Paula Sachs Wise. 2007. *School Psychology: Past, Present, and Future*. 3rd edition. Bethesda, MA: National Association of School Psychologists.
- Feldman, Daniel C., William R. Folks and William H. Turnley. 1999. "Mentor-Protege Diversity and Its Impact on International Internship Experiences." *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 20 (5): 597–611.
- Feldman, Daniel C., and David C. Thomas. 1992. "Career Management Issues Facing Expatriates." *Journal of International Business Studies* 23 (2): 271–293.
- Heng, Kawai, Phui Jean Ch'ng, Wen Rong Hung, Xui Chi Ooi and Chien Yin Soh. 2011. "Internship Satisfaction: A Preliminary Study on Undergraduates from the Faculty of Business and Finance of Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman." Final year project, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia.
- Henze, Brent R. 2006. "The Research-Experiential Internship in Professional Communication." *Technical Communication* 53 (3): 339–347.
- IIE (Institute of International Education). 2019. "Project Atlas: Higher Education Students Study Abroad." www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Project-Atlas/Explore-Data/Current-Infographics.
- Jiani, M. A. 2016. "Why and How International Students Choose Mainland China as a Higher Education Study Abroad Destination." *Higher Education*. doi.org/10.1007/s10734-016-0066-0.
- Knight, Jane. 2008. *Higher Education in Turmoil: The Changing World of Internationalisation*. Global Perspectives on Higher Education Vol. 13. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Knight, Jane, ed. 2014. *International Education Hubs: Student, Talent, Knowledge-Innovation Models*. New York: Springer.
- Louis, Meryl R., Barry Z. Posner and Gary N. Powell. 1983. "The Availability and Helpfulness of Socialization Practices." *Personnel Psychology* 36 (4): 857–866.
- OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). 2017. *Education at a Glance 2017 - OECD Indicators*. Paris: OECD Publishing. www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance-19991487.htm.
- Rothman, Miriam. 2003. "Internships: Most and Least Favored Aspects among a Business School Sample." *Psychological Reports* 93 (3): 921–924.
- Taylor, Susan M. 1985. "The Roles of Occupational Knowledge and Vocational Self-Concept Crystallization in Students' School-to-Work Transition." *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 32 (4): 539.
- Taylor, Susan M. 1988. "Effects of College Internships on Individual Participants." *Journal of Applied Psychology* 73 (3): 393.