

# **The value of industrial attachment to the archives and records management students at the National University of Science and Technology in Zimbabwe**

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## **Abstract**

Industrial attachment is a key and integral part of tertiary education. Its incorporation into the learning process is aimed at imparting practical skills to students, which cannot be acquired in classrooms. However, students' experiences during industrial attachment differ, as some benefit while others find the placement to be a waste of time and resources. Students in the Department of Archives and Records Management (ARM) at the National University of Science and Technology (NUST) have to go through industrial attachment for one academic year at an organisation that has archives and records management systems in place. This paper sought to establish NUST ARM students' views on the value of industrial attachment. The study applied a qualitative research methodology and a case study research design. Purposive sampling was used since the selected cohort had just completed its one-year industrial attachment period. Open-ended questionnaires were hand delivered to the students. The findings revealed that ARM students at NUST regard industrial attachment as a very important part of their learning process; industrial attachment had in most cases inspired students to appreciate the ARM profession. The one academic year industrial attachment period was adequate in hosting institutions. The study recommended that NUST ARM department should ensure that industrial attachment is done in a professional and systematic manner in which hosting institutions are genuine and credible collaborating partners. It is hoped that this study will inform curriculum revision especially in the area of practicum in archives and records management.

**Keywords:** industrial attachment, practical, theory, records and archives management

## **1. Introduction and background to the study**

A combination of classroom theory and work-related learning is the right platform for producing archivists and records managers who are critical thinkers, researchers, pragmatists, and informed decision-makers. According to Owusu-Acheampong, Williams and Azu (2014:63), the industrial attachment exercise is an indispensable module of the prospectus of any establishment of advanced learning. Higher learning institutions are now providing students with the opportunity to translate the knowledge gained into practice through industrial training, also known as practical training or internship (Rodzalan & Saat 2012). According to Južnic and Pymm (2016), industrial attachment programmes in archives and records management serve as a specific bond between theory on the one hand and practical work and the profession on the other. Institutions of higher learning have therefore shifted focus away from traditional academic learning methods to encouraging educators to view the archives and records management school experience from an entirely different perspective, with very positive results reported by both students and practitioners (Bilodeau & Carson 2015). Properly implemented industrial attachment programmes benefit students as it bridges academic preparation with real-world applied research and it is difficult for students to gain these skills solely from coursework (Cohen 2014).

Universities and colleges also benefit from the interface with industry and use the feedback to continually strive to produce students who are fit for the market (Warinda 2013:784). In the same vein, Karunaratne and Perera (2015) attest that industrial attachment programmes are used as strategies to secure employability for students soon after graduation, and they also ensure a holistic

education system. Industrial attachment programmes are key as they collaborate students, archives programmes, and the sites hosting interns (National Council on Public History Curriculum and Training Committee, 2008:1). Industrial attachment reinforces industrial or institution partnership (Ayarkwa, Adinyira & Osei-Asibery 2012).

A number of terms which include an internship, practicums, work-related learning, will be used interchangeably with industrial attachment in this paper. Industrial attachment in higher learning institutions is a structured, credit-bearing work experience in a professional work setting (Kiplagat, Khamasi & Karei 2016). According to Mgya and Mbekomize (2014:129), internship programmes entail attaching students to various organisations so that they can have a practical insight on what they learn theoretically at school. Such programmes, according to Karunaratne and Perera (2015:2), have been necessitated by industrial pressure and the growing demand for competent graduates with the right knowledge, skills and attitudes. However, less has been done to establish how archives and records management students view industrial attachment programmes benefit them. Against this background, this study sought to investigate the views of records and archives students from NUST on their experiences during industrial attachment.

The National University of Science and Technology (NUST) was established in 1991. The University offers a four-year Bachelor of Science Honours Degrees that include a one-year industrial attachment period component aimed at equipping students with practical skills. The industrial attachment programme is rolled out in the third academic year, after which, students return for their fourth and final year. Masters and Doctorate degree programmes at

NUST do not include an industrial attachment. This study only focused on the Archives and Records Management (ARM) undergraduate programme. The ARM Department at NUST sends its students for placement with organisations such as the National Archives of Zimbabwe, the Bulawayo City Council, banks, hospitals, parastatals, and government departments inter alia. Students are assessed and at the end of the industrial attachment year, they submit their experiential report for examination and assessments report from an academic supervisor who is their lecturer and the industrial supervisor who is the industry-based professional. Their scores from these reports are considered for the third year marks.

Of late, management at NUST has questioned the importance of industrial attachment. Some thinkers within the university have called for the need to rethink the way the industrial attachment programme should be administered inter alia. Some academics have called for the abolition of the programmes, whereas others propose that it be reduced from one year to a semester or even less. These views were gathered through departmental meetings and other platforms at NUST where the authors were academics in the ARM department. However, in debates and deliberations made, voices of students who have gone through the industrial attachment exercise have not been consulted widely. Therefore, this study was triggered by the need to hear views of records and archives management students on the value of industrial attachment based on their experiences during their industrial attachment.

## **2. The importance of industrial attachment**

Students stand to benefit from properly designed and implemented industrial attachment programmes as Asare, Antwiadjei-Manu and Ababio (2015) highlighted that such programmes provide a smooth transition from the academic world to the working environment. Scholars such as Šimicevic and Štetic (2017) opine that industrial attachment may assure students that they will possess all necessary knowledge and practical skills and abilities for employment at operational and managerial positions. The possession of such skills and knowledge is important as Kayundi (2011) stresses that employers now look for people who possess the appropriate combination of educational preparation and practical training suitable to match the needs of their institutions. Westbrook and Fabian (2010) point out that industrial attachment exposes students to the continuous changes in the professional environment, which helps avoid the gaps between their training and their future professional responsibilities.

Records and archives management scholars have also highlighted the importance of industrial attachment (Garaba 2015; Langmead 2014; Biraud 2013; Pacios 2013; Duranti 2007). Garaba (2015) emphasises that practical training and work experience are both very important in the training of archivists and records managers. Industrial attachment is key as Kumar (2011) highlights that university-based archives management courses lack a practical element in managing electronic records and students do not have the opportunity to translate theory to practice. To Biraud (2013:31), records and archives management has practical dimensions that should not be neglected and require hands-on exercises in face-to-face sessions in the workplace.

However, this is not to diminish the value of classroom theory as Duranti (2007:57) stresses that practical experience in the context of archival education serves to provide future archivists with a way of applying their theoretical and methodological knowledge in class, and then testing it in the professional arena. Pacios (2013) concurs with Duranti (2007:57) as he notes that academic internships in archives represent a first step towards the tasks performed by professionals and they also allow students to apply and supplement the knowledge acquired from their academic training. For the majority of archives positions available, practical experience is a requirement (National Council on Public History Curriculum and Training Committee 2008).

Internships, in-service learning and fieldwork placements are critical practical components of training in records and archives management (Langmead, 2014:140). These practical exercises provide students with a unique opportunity to connect the skills and knowledge gained in their archives education with practical experience (National Council on Public History Curriculum and Training Committee 2008; Karunaratne & Perera 2015). Professional internships allow graduate students to gain new insights into the nature of archival practice by engaging in meaningful work under the mentorship of experienced and knowledgeable archives professionals (National Council on Public History Curriculum and Training Committee 2008:1). To put it in the words of Karunaratne and Perera (2015:3), internship programmes do not only provide significant benefits to students in terms of career preparation and income but also to strengthen their self-confidence and self-satisfaction in the lifelong learning process.

According to Južnic and Pymm (2016:94), the industrial attachment programme serves to benefit the student in the following ways:

- to acquire knowledge and insight into ways in which his or her knowledge and analytical skills can be applied in practice; to select and apply appropriate research methods;
- to develop personal and interpersonal competencies, and entrepreneurial and management attitudes and skills, including the ability to work in a team;
- to become aware of the professional world and its infrastructure;
- to acquire positive professional ethics;
- to gain an awareness of his or her capabilities;
- to learn how to learn from experience; and
- to increase his or her employability by acquiring practical knowledge and skills; and providing evidence of this experience.

With regards to industrial attachment, student satisfaction is key as it influences their decision to continue practising in their field (Mihanovic, Batinic & Pavicic, 2016). Danjuma and Rasli (2012) assert that students' satisfaction with the overall faculty environment is essential for keeping them at the relevant faculty, as well as for their recommendations of the faculty to prospective students.

However, Pill and Pilli (2013) argue that industrial attachment training does not always mean that students will benefit. Kayundi (2011) points out that students in archives and records management programmes do take a practicum in the course of their studies but the results have rather been less impressive. According to Kayundi's (2011), analysis of the internship programme at the

University of Fort Hare, South Africa was that there seems to be more loss than gain. Students have also complained that when there is little or no involvement of the institution in the placement process; the procedure is stressful for them (Kiplagat, Khamasi & Karei 2016). Spio-Kwofie (2016) asserts that there has been difficulty in the placement of students every year for industrial training. The most challenging aspect of practical training is how to organise it to be successful and meaningful for all parties (Pill & Pilli 2013).

Most students fail to secure employment with organisations they would have been placed at during their industrial attachment years (Šimicevic & Štetic 2017). Industrial attachment programmes can lead to organisations forestalling the hiring of qualified professional archivists as organisations prefer cheap labour provided by interns (Langmead, 2014). Therefore, the very system designed to help provide early experience to budding professionals is keeping the field from creating jobs that would then be filled by these very same people (Langmead 2014).

### **3. Statement of the problem**

Despite the importance of industrial attachment as pointed out in other studies (Asare, Antwiadjei-Manu & Ababio 2015; Šimicevic & Štetic 2017; Kayundi 2011; National Council on Public History Curriculum and Training Committee, 2008; Matamande et al., 2013; Južnic & Pymm, 2016; González & Hevia, 2011), there is no evidence that the views of the NUST ARM students have been established with regard to the value of its link to what they learn at university. The management at NUST has questioned the importance of industrial attachment and such views it as costly to the university since students

are located in different hosting institutions spread all over the country have to be visited for assessments. The university management, together with academics, have sought to ascertain the value of industrial attachment and different opinions have been raised in the process. However, these consultations and debate have not adequately sought to capture the views of students, especially those returning from the internship. This problem resonates well with Pacios's (2013:196) view that literature highlighting assessments of Information and Documentation internships from the point of view of the interns are scarce. Making decisions on industrial attachment without input from students is suicidal and uninformed.

#### **4. Purpose of the study**

This study sought to investigate the value and shortfalls of Industrial Attachment to the archives and records Management Students at the National University of Science and Technology in Zimbabwe.

The specific objectives of the study were to:

- Determine students' views on the relevance of industrial attachment;
- Establish students' experiences during industrial attachment;
- Find out how the students were influenced by hosting organisation in their learning process; and
- Establish students' views about the hosting organisation's industrial supervisors' capability in assisting them to learn more on the job about their discipline.

#### **5. Scope and research methodology**

The study was conducted to gather views of the students only and not of the hosting organisations or the students' lecturers. In addition, the study did not include the views of such organisations like the National Archives of Zimbabwe, the Bulawayo City Council, banks, hospitals, parastatals, and other government departments who usually take students for industrial attachment. This was done to avoid handling large data-sets. Studies to include hosting departments could be done in the future.

A qualitative research methodology and a case study research design were applied in this study. Qualitative research is based on naturalistic inquiry, that is, studying real-world situations as they unfold naturally; non-manipulative and non-controlling; openness to whatever emerges (Patton 2002). Therefore, the researchers applied qualitative research methodology as it enabled the discovery of 'insider' rather than 'outsider' perspectives (Vanclay 2012:15). Furthermore, qualitative research is well suited for exploring hidden reasons behind the complex, interrelated, or multifaceted social processes, such as inter-firm relationships (Bhattacharjee 2012:105). Applying the case study research design was informed by Anderson (1993) who notes that this research design is concerned with how and why things happen, allowing the investigation of contextual realities and the differences between what was planned and what actually occurred. Therefore, this research design enabled researchers to investigate industrial attachment experiences. The study sought to capture the students' views and the case study research design was well suited. Runeson and Host (2009:135) highlight that an interpretivist-based case study attempts to understand phenomena through the participants' interpretation of their context. Purposive sampling was applied in this study using fourth-year RAM students who had just completed their industrial

attachment year were selected. An interview schedule was sent to the 27 fourth year students as it was not practical to interview them face-to-face or via telephone. All students (27) responded to give a 100% response rate. Data were analysed thematically and narratives of the respondents were presented. Questions were drafted guided by the objectives of the study, and thus themes used in data presentation emerged from the data that were gathered.

## **6. Presentation of the findings**

This section presents the findings of the study.

### **6.1 The relevancy of the industrial attachment to the learning process**

The first objective of the study sought to determine the students' views on the relevance of industrial attachment to the learning process. All the 27 respondents felt that industrial attachment was a very key part of their learning process. These students cited reasons such as the fact that industrial attachment presented them with the opportunity to apply the classroom theory into practice and learn from experts in their field. Another reason raised by these respondents was that the industrial attachment exercise presented them with the platform to be innovative and be problem solvers in their places of work. Furthermore, data showed that industrial attachment had exposed students to the importance of records management to organisations and the exercise had exposed students to the work environment and its demands.

### **6.2 Experiences and benefits during industrial attachment**

The study also established the experiences of the students from the industrial attachment programme. Out of the 27 participants, 23 indicated that they had

benefited from industrial attachment. These respondents highlighted that industrial attachment groomed them for professional working environments. However, 12 of the 23 students who alluded to having benefited from industrial attachment stressed that the industrial attachment period made them realise that not everything learned in class was applicable in real-world workplaces. This had made them aware of the need for academia and industry to work closely together in order to align real work experiences with classroom theory. The 23 students highlighted that industrial attachment had made them aware of the fact that records and archives management was not only meant for the public service as the private sector and non-governmental organisations were in need of interns. To them, this meant that they were supposed to cast their nets wide when seeking employment after graduating. These respondents also highlighted benefits such as “socialising and networking with records and other professionals”; “improvement of communication skills, client relations and confidence”.

It emerged that four of the participants revealed that they did not benefit from industrial attachment as the hosting institutions did not have meaningful records management tasks for them. These respondents highlighted that they spent most of their industrial attachment year doing tasks, which were not related to records and archives management. One of these four respondents revealed that “my supervisor saw me as a threat and would therefore not entertain any innovation and ideas that I came up with”.

### **6.3 Hosting organisations industrial supervisors’ abilities to train attaches**

The other objective of the study was to establish students’ views on the industrial supervisors' capability to assist them to learn more on the job about

their records and archives management discipline. Thirteen participants revealed that there were no qualified records and archives management personnel where they were placed for industrial attachment. This set of participants highlighted that there was no much to learn from their industrial attachment supervisors whose professional backgrounds included business administration, human resources management, accounting, and computer science.

The remaining 14 participants reported that there were qualified RAM industrial attachment supervisors where they were placed. These respondents highlighted that having qualified RAM industrial attachment was a boost as they were given records and archives management related assignments and they were guided and instructed accordingly. Having such qualified RAM industrial attachment also made them read further as some industrial supervisors were even examining them on theoretical concepts through tests and assignments.

#### **6.4 Suitability of hosting institutions for industrial attachment**

The study also sought to establish the suitability of industrial attachment hosting institutions for training. In this regard, 21 participants stated that their hosting institutions were well-suited for ARM industrial attachment. These respondents highlighted that their hosting institutions were suitable for industrial attachment because “they had registries”; “there were records and archives management systems” and “the organisations were open to suggestions from students”. However, seven of these 21 participants highlighted that the hosting institutions, though suitable for industrial attachment training, lacked qualified RAM industrial attachment supervisors.

Nevertheless, six participants indicated that their hosting institutions were not suitable for industrial attachment. Their reasons included the “absence of qualified ARM industrial attachment supervisors”; “the absence of records and archives management systems and units”; “industrial attachment supervisors who were not concerned about their progress”; and “being assigned tasks and responsibilities not related to records and archives management”.

### **6.5 The value of a one-year industrial attachment**

The study also sought to establish the value of a one-year industrial attachment. In response, 24 participants were of the view that the one academic year period was adequate for industrial attachment since there were many records and archives management activities to learn. To these participants one year was enough to adapt, learn and prove their worth in their hosting institutions. One of these interviewees revealed that “the first half of the academic year is for adapting to the organisational culture, learning work routines and performing assigned duties. The second half of the year is for being innovative, proving one’s worth and being an integral part of the organisation.”

However, three participants felt that one academic year industrial attachment period was too long. One of these respondents stressed that “one semester is enough, the rest of the months will be a waste of time and that is when students get to be abused and made to do duties not related to records and archives management.” Another interviewee was of the view that “dedicating one full academic year was a waste as there was a lot of repetition of tasks and less of learning new things”. On the contrary, the other participant pointed out that “I

learned all that the organisation had to offer within the first two months. Thereafter, I was just repeating tasks and not learning anything new.”

### **6.6 Influence of hosting organisations on the students about the records and archives management profession**

The study also sought to determine how the hosting institutions shaped students view on records and archives management profession. In response, 19 participants highlighted that the industrial attachment exercise had made them value their profession as they could see how central it is to business operations, decision-making and efficiency. These participants also indicated that industrial attachment had made them aware of the fact that records and archives management was applicable in all sectors and therefore they could be employed not only in the public sector but in many other sectors such as the private and non-governmental sectors.

Nevertheless, eight participants highlighted that their industrial attachment experiences had a negative impact on their view of the records and archives management profession. These respondents highlighted that they were constantly looked down upon during industrial attachment and they felt that their services as budding records management professionals were not needed.

### **6.7 NUST improvements opportunities to industrial attachment**

The study also sought students' views on how NUST can improve the industrial attachment programme. The participants indicated the need to improve the industrial attachment programme at NUST. Furthermore, the participants indicated that the university was supposed to assess students at least twice during the industrial attachment year and not only once. These

respondents further stressed that the RAM department at NUST was supposed to find out if hosting institutions were suitable for industrial attachment. Furthermore, respondents felt that there was a need for the university to find hosting institutions which provided allowances to cater for transport and housing as some of them were placed far from their hometowns and areas. Furthermore, respondents argued that the university was supposed to give them enough time to look for attachment places, not to do so when students from other universities would have secured places ahead of them. Respondents also felt that there was a need for the RAM department at NUST to market the degree programme widely so that a number of organisations, especially in the private sector could know about the degree programme and go on to host students on industrial attachment. The respondents also highlighted the need for rigorous industrial attachment workshops by the RAM department in order to prepare students for placement. One recurring view among all the responses was that the department of RAM was supposed to constantly communicate with hosting institutions to ensure that the work environment was beneficial to students.

## **7. Conclusion and recommendations**

Based on the study findings, it is clear that RAM students at NUST regard industrial attachment as a very important part of their learning process. Sumathi et al. (2012) came up with the same conclusion when they argued that industrial attachment programmes develop the practical and competency skills necessary for developing society. This research concludes that students benefited immensely from the industrial attachment as they highlighted that their communication skills, problem-solving abilities, entrepreneurship,

behavioural skills and critical thinking skills had improved due to undergoing industrial attachment. Industrial attachment enabled students to develop their communication, time management and networking skills. The benefits of the industrial attachment programme highlighted by respondents in this study resonate with those highlighted by Lim and Mustafa, (2013); Lai, Karim and Johl (2011). Some benefits of industrial attachment programmes include improvement of communication and language proficiency (Lim & Mustafa, 2013), and the improvement of student's soft skills attributes such as lifetime learning capacity, critical thinking, communication and behavioural skills (Lai, et al. 2011).

Oliver (2010) (cited in Bukaliya 2012) opines that the short amount of time an internship lasts really never lets the student become a fully functional employee because there is not so much to take in for them. Furthermore, it emerged in this study that industrial attachment had in most cases inspired students to appreciate the RAM profession and see its value as an important aspect of business processes. The study also concludes that one academic year industrial attachment period was adequate in hosting institutions which had adequate records and archives management systems since students are exposed to many learning about different records management functions. In such institutions, students could rotate between units which included registries, records centres and archives inter alia. In areas that did not have sound records and archives management systems, the one academic year period was too long as students would be tasked to do irrelevant tasks and some menial jobs or sent on personal errands without learning much. The respondents also highlighted that in some hosting institutions, they were assigned tasks that had nothing to do with records and archives management.

The findings of the study also pointed to the fact that the placement process was not entirely up to the department as students could find placement for themselves. These findings were in line with Kiplagat, Khamasi and Karei's (2016) conclusion that tertiary institutions investigated were not involved or less involved in the industrial attachment placement process. Therefore, the study concludes that this approach would usually lead to students placing themselves in institutions which did not have proper records management systems and qualified supervisors.

The study concludes that even though the industrial attachment process was a very important part of the learning process, there was a need to improve the programme as there were challenges which hindered students from benefiting. This observation was in line with Van Dorp's (2008) argument that industrial attachment programmes do not necessarily provide a meaningful learning experience owing to various challenges that significantly affect the overall quality of the programme. It also emerged that challenges faced by students during industrial attachment include the fact that the RAM department did not assess the suitability of industrial attachment hosting institutions. This culminated in students being placed in institutions which neither had proper records and archives management systems nor qualified RAM industrial attachment supervisors. Such scenarios left students stranded and without people to guide them. Rothman (2007) points out that complaints have been raised against employers for treating interns as cheap labour. This study also concluded that another challenge faced was that there was less communication between the RAM department and hosting institutions. Students highlighted

that this lack of communication left them to deal with challenges on their own, as there was no one from the department to intervene.

In view of the findings and conclusions, the study, therefore, recommended the following:

- NUST RAM department should ensure that industrial attachment is done in a professional and systematic manner in which hosting institutions are genuine collaborating partners. There should be better collaboration and communication between hosting institutions and the NUST RAM department.
- NUST RAM department should establish the suitability of potential hosting institutions before placing students.
- Such a move would go a long way in ensuring that hosting institutions have the proper facilities and resources needed to impart practical skills on students.
- The study also recommends the need for the department to come up with workshops aimed at informing students about the industrial attachment exercise and what it seeks to achieve.
- The researchers also recommend the need to ensure that industrial attachment is performed under the supervision of qualified records and archives management professionals.
- These researchers also recommended the need to ensure that the industrial attachment program must be educational and provide students with hands-on experience and not replace the work of professional records and archives staff.
- The study further recommends that industrial attachment programmes be designed in such a way that students complete projects or products

such as digitising a collection, creating a records management system and setting up an archive inter alia. Such an approach would lead to the creation of tangible products that can add value to students' profiles as well as show their ability to contribute to organisations business processes.

- The study gathered views on industrial attachment from students but did not include the hosting organisations such as the National Archives of Zimbabwe, the Bulawayo City Council, banks, hospitals, parastatals, and government departments. This area could be looked at in another study.

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