

## STUDENTS' FIELDWORK EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES: THE CASE OF THE COLLEGE OF BUSINESS EDUCATION (CBE), DAR ES SALAAM CAMPUS, TANZANIA

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### ABSTRACT

*The main objective of this study was to investigate students' fieldwork experiences and challenges at the College of Business Education (CBE), Dar es Salaam Campus in Tanzania using a qualitative approach. The study was conducted between August and September, 2016 and June and July, 2017. The respondents were 29 first year diploma and bachelor degree students from three different academic programmes, who were located in 14 stations in Dar es Salaam City, in both public and private organizations. The data were collected through individual interviews and focus group discussions while data analysis was performed using the content analysis technique. The study was guided by the social constructivist perspective. Findings yielded nine themes including students' appreciation to the College for the fieldwork programme, timing for sending fieldwork letters to companies and need for formal fieldwork orientation, just to name a few. The study concludes that students still consider fieldwork to be an important component in their preparation for their future career. The study recommends that higher learning institutions should make it their deliberate point to plan well their fieldwork programmes and respond to students' needs in order to create fieldwork educational experiences that will benefit their students and the organisations where the students are sent.*

**Keywords:** *Business Students, Fieldwork Experiences, Fieldwork Challenges*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Fieldwork is generally conceived to be an experiential learning component in many courses whereby students are placed in practical settings away from their training institutions where they are expected to complete a required number of hours (Dhemba, 2012; Ainsworth, 2016). Even though the meaning of the word 'fieldwork' seems to be a contested terrain because of its diverse use in many professions (where it is variously called field instruction, field education, field internship, field experience, clinical experiences, cooperative education, service learning, practicum, practical training, work experience, field placement or work placement, et cetera), the importance of fieldwork in the training of students in higher learning institutions is acknowledged by both seasoned professionals and students alike (Bogo, 2010; Drolet *et al.*, 2012). According to Ralph *et al.* (2010) fieldwork seems to be anchored on the premise that students will explore the link between classroom instruction and practice in the real world of work and apply relevant knowledge and skills to solve "real-life problems encountered by actual practitioners" in the field depending on the specific needs of the practicing organizations and the training institutions.

In Tanzania, fieldwork falls within the need for higher learning institutions to offer 'relevant' education as advocated by the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (MOEST) for some years now (WyEMU, 2014). The National Accreditation Council for Technical Education (NACTE), the MOEST agency for regulating technical education under which CBE operates, recognizes fieldwork as one of the important components of the curriculum to be taken by business students in order for them to qualify for their National Technical Awards (NTAs) at different levels (NACTE, 2010). Therefore, fieldwork is the course that is given at CBE due importance just as the other academic instructions and it is compulsory to all diploma and bachelor degree students at the various stages of their courses. Usually, the College fieldwork Coordinator organizes fieldwork placements throughout the country either directly or through the assistance of fieldwork students. The College supervisors (lecturers) oversee the fieldwork implementation through visiting each student and their company fieldwork supervisor in order to ensure that the students complete their fieldwork successfully (in terms of meeting the minimum number of hours at the fieldwork site and behaving professionally) as well as writing their fieldwork report under his/her guidance after the fieldwork.

In spite of the fact that fieldwork is practised every year by many higher learning institutions in Tanzania, little is known about the experiences and challenges of fieldwork students. The general objective of the current study is therefore, to investigate students' fieldwork experiences and challenges at the College of Business Education (CBE), Dar es Salaam Campus, in Tanzania. The specific objectives of the study were three: (1) To identify students' opinions on their experiences during fieldwork (2) To find out whether fieldwork students had challenges and the types of those challenges (3) To explore any other fieldwork students' opinions that they deemed important about the fieldwork management practices. The outcome of this study would serve as a contribution to the understanding and improvement of fieldwork practices at CBE and other higher learning institutions in Tanzania.

In this study, the definitions of the words 'experiences' and 'challenges' are based on Merriam -Webster's Dictionary (Android Edition, 2017) and other scholarly works related to student fieldwork. In this case, fieldwork experiences refer to those things that the students encountered by either seeing or doing during their fieldwork as well as things that gave students practical knowledge about their fieldwork. Bogo and Litvack (2010) perceive fieldwork to be an encounter with feelings of anxiety ("an emotionally intense experience") which can lead to a satisfactory or dissatisfactory fieldwork experience. Begley (2009) has associated fieldwork experiences with field realities or "lived experiences" which can involve students' feelings of isolation, frustration, fear, distrust, and insecurity during fieldwork. On the other hand, fieldwork challenges refer to those things that confronted or conflicted with the students' general expectations of how fieldwork should be managed. Thomas *et al.*(2006) associated challenges of fieldwork students to barriers of achieving what fieldwork students wanted to achieve, such as the difficulty of getting fieldwork placements. In the same vein, Begley (2009) alluded to fieldwork challenges as problems or limitations that may arise during fieldwork or afterwards.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a general agreement in literature that fieldwork is essential for students' skills development for future employment (Ralph *et al.*,2010; Bogo, 2010; Drolet *et al.*, 2012) and that fieldwork is a site of intersection between students, faculty, training institutions, field coordinators, company staff, different worldviews and practice theories (Clark and Drolet, 2014). According to Noel (2017) fieldwork is meant to provide students with several opportunities including learning by doing, transferring their classroom knowledge to actual work and creating important networks with industry professionals. Fieldwork also helps students to sharpen their classroom skills and give them meaningful professional education, develop their skills in human relations and communication skills, increase their career options through exposure and simplify their possibility for future employment (Smith, 2012; Pugalia, 2015). Based on this understanding, the importance of fieldwork cannot be underestimated especially at a time when scholars are reporting on recent trends for an increased relevance in education that focuses on graduates' employability (Pegg *et al.*, 2012; Smith, 2012) thus making completion of work experience such as fieldwork to be considered very important and closely associated with students' higher rates of subsequent employment (Walker and Blankemeyer, 2013; Pugalia, 2015). No wonder Bwemelo (2017) argues that students' fieldwork should be managed by the training institutions in such a way that it helps the students to be more practical in their respective disciplines rather than just concentrating on production of fieldwork reports at the end of the fieldwork. Preston *et al.* (2014) advocates for what they call "pedagogy for employability" saying that in an environment of high tuition and low economic growth, students are seeking a high return on their educational dollars and they view fieldwork and other forms of work-integrated learning as an investment that would give them employment in the future.

Contrary to expectations, what some scholars have discovered is a mere acknowledgement of the theoretical importance of a strong link between training institutions and employers without the reality on the ground attesting to that link (Ndalyi, 2016; Olomi, 2015). As a result of that unfortunate situation, skills gap, problems about graduates' job fit and unemployment outcry continue to persist in Tanzania (Olomi, 2015). Recent findings have revealed that in Tanzania, some graduates take months and even years to get employed (Ndalyi, 2016). Moreover, a recent study of students in two business schools in Tanzania by Mbise (2016) showed that the majority of students had low job expectations because they believed they lack the necessary skills and competencies needed for future employment.

Interestingly, Noel (2017) has insightfully observed that in order to qualify for a decent job a decade ago it was enough for a student to have good academic performance. But things have changed and now companies want to make sure students can put to practice what they learned in college before they are offered a job. That necessarily highlights the importance of fieldwork in training students as it gives students hands-on experience in the

organizations they are likely to work for in the future. Such an observation has also been confirmed recently by Ishengoma and Vaaland (2016) in their study of University-Industry Linkages (involving students, faculty members and employees from 20 companies in Tanzania), by showing that students' fieldwork in companies is strongly perceived to trigger employability among students.

Despite the above acknowledgement of the importance of fieldwork in literature, various researchers have identified several issues of concerns in fieldwork practice including the fact that fieldwork students are disappointed by the fieldwork duration not being long enough for them to practice satisfactorily as well as the fieldwork not being well placed within the context of the students' overall study programme (Preston *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, there has existed a disturbing perceived 'theory-practice divide' between coursework and the realities students face during practice (Preston *et al.*, 2014).

After studying fieldwork across a range of professions Ralph *et al.* (2010) concluded that training institutions need to seriously explore how to optimally conduct the fieldwork portion of their programs in order to make it relevant. This view is shared by many researchers who believe that through high quality fieldwork experiences, students can receive meaningful feedback as well as gain insight into their own strengths and challenges (Wee, Weber and Park, 2014; Chandler and Williamson, 2013). Such relevance is even more important at a time when literature continue to point out, for example, although the quality of the fieldwork experience is directly related to the quality of the fieldwork supervision (Korth and Baum, 2011), the reality is that not all fieldwork students experience high-quality supervision (Ainsworth, 2016), which leaves students with poor fieldwork experience. In view of those challenging issues in fieldwork management literature, the current researcher felt a strong compulsion to understand fieldwork students' experiences and challenges in Tanzania using the College of Business Education as a case study.

The need to study Tanzania's fieldwork students' experiences and challenges was made even stronger after the researcher met a great paucity of fieldwork literature on business students in Tanzania. The researcher found out that this topic is either implicitly mentioned in other studies on such issues as students' employability and entrepreneurship (see Munishi, 2016; Ishengoma and Vaaland, 2016; Bwemelo, 2017) or the topic is scantily implied in studies that deal with topics such as students' job fit and job expectations in Tanzania (see Olomi, 2015; Ndyali, 2016; Mbise, 2016). This study, therefore, seeks to reduce that void in literature.

## 2.1 Theoretical Perspective

The current study was guided by the social constructivist perspective because fieldwork is viewed as experiential education in most literature (Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner, 2007). Social constructivism, rooted in the pioneering educational works of Dewey (1938) and Vygotsky (1978) who posit that learners construct their own knowledge from their experiences through collaboration, dialogue, engagement and consideration as well as critique of the views of others (Merriam *et al.* 2007). Kolb and Kolb (2005) view experiential learning (such as fieldwork practices) as both centred on students' lived experiences and an authentic, transformative, active, and holistic process made up of cycles of experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting. This theoretical perspective perfectly reflects the fieldwork students who go to placement sites with an intention to experience practically what they learn from the classroom as well as learn new things from the placement sites through reflecting and doing.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed an exploratory, qualitative approach which has proved useful in understanding fieldwork practices in other institutions of higher learning in the past (eg. see Ralph *et al.*, 2010). The study involved a total of 29 business education students from the College of Business Education, Dar es Salaam Campus, Tanzania who did their fieldwork in Dar es Salaam City between August and September, 2016 and June and July, 2017. The sampling technique used was purposive as this researcher studied students placed under his fieldwork supervision for the two consecutive years. To be able to provide relevant data the study participants had to fulfil three of the researcher's set criteria (1) being fieldwork students in first year diploma or bachelor degree programmes (to be able to capture fresh insights from current fieldwork students) (2) being under the supervision of the researcher (for easy accessibility of respondents) (3) not to have been implied in a recent study by Mbise (2016) as being in the top category of students who had high job expectations (that is, students of Legal and Industrial Metrology, Banking and Finance, Computer Science, Tax administration and Business Administration as their fieldwork experiences were likely to lack serious challenges). Based on the three criteria, students in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Legal and

Industrial Metrology and Education students pursuing Bachelor degree in Business Studies did not qualify for providing data as they lacked one or more of the set criteria.

In order to capture a diversity of students' opinions the study participants were drawn from three different academic programmes (Accountancy, Procurement and Supply Management, and Marketing Management), two different levels of education (Diploma and Bachelor degree students), ten different organizations in fourteen locations in Dar es Salaam City and both public and private organizations. Out of the 29 students, 12 students (5 males and 7 females) were from the 2016 cohort of first year Bachelor degree students and the remaining 17 students (8 males and 9 females) were from the 2017 cohort of first year Diploma students. In September, 2016 the researcher conducted individual interviews with all the 12 first year Bachelor degree students as well as conducted one focus group discussion with them (which was attended by 8 students out of the 12) at the premises of the College during their fieldwork write-up when they had come back from their fieldwork. Similarly, in July 2017 the researcher interviewed all the 17 first year Diploma students individually and later conducted two focus group discussions with 15 students (in groups of 7 and 8 respectively) at the college premises during their fieldwork write-up after they returned from their fieldwork. Normally, the focus group sessions took about 30 to 45 minutes to be completed.

Data analysis was performed shortly after the individual interviews or focus group discussions using content analysis technique in an attempt to probe for meaning and look for natural themes and patterns emerged from the collected data (Cooper & Schindler, 2009; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Only the relevant parts of the interviews and the focus group discussions were transcribed and coded through a process called "data sampling" to reduce the vast amount of time that could be used for analysing every word and reaction given by the respondents following Saunders *et al.*'s (2009) suggestion. The researcher moderated the discussions until there was "saturation", that is, no more new ideas coming up from the participants (Auerbach & Silverstain, 2003).

#### **4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

After the content analysis, the data from the individual interviews and focus group discussions yielded nine themes related to students' fieldwork experiences and challenges. The themes are as follows:

##### **4.1 Students' appreciation to the College for the fieldwork programme**

Most of the students thanked the College of Business Education for having the fieldwork programme in place and they appreciated the positive lessons they gained from their workplaces (such as handling customers, building teamwork spirit and application of knowledge they had learnt at the College). This suggests that students understand the importance of fieldwork in their academic training and they expect much from it. That understanding is supported by Ishengoma and Vaaland (2016) who had also found that students had a positive attitude for fieldwork placement in Tanzania.

However, there were some students who either thought their classroom theory had limited applicability at their workplaces or felt they lacked understanding of some things because they had not been taught at the College (fortunately, they were taught by the company supervisors to enable them to perform their duties). This phenomenon seems to fit with Ndyali's (2016) observation that students in Tanzania learn largely through lectures and textbooks and hence they are academically sound, but they lack practical experiences and practical techniques associated with their professions. Perhaps that tells something about the need for higher learning institutions (CBE, in this case) to design curricular that respond to the real needs of the workplaces.

##### **4.2 Students' treatment by the fieldwork companies**

The majority of students had positive feelings about the companies where they did their fieldwork. They talked about how cordially were received and treated by the company executives and other employees as well as how the supervisors and colleagues were willing to guide them in performing their duties. Most of them cited being called "wadogo zetu" (our young brothers/sisters) or "vijana wetu" (our young people) by supervisors and colleagues. That is more likely to maintain relationships with the employers and simplify possibilities for future employment (Smith, 2012; Noel, 2017). If this cordial relationship between the fieldwork host companies and fieldwork students is cherished, both the companies and students will benefit from the experience of working together as partners. This will also increase the collaboration between the College and the companies.



In contrast, there was one female student who experienced very poor cooperation from her first company female-supervisor. The situation was so bad that the student had to change the placement company because for unknown reasons the supervisor daily refused to assign her any duty telling her “*just find what you can do here or do what you think others are doing*”. Such bad experiences had been implicated in Ainsworth (2016)’s conclusion on students’ fieldwork experiences that some students were not receiving high-quality fieldwork supervision from some companies as expected.

#### **4.3 Timing for sending fieldwork letters to companies**

All students expressed their concern over the timing for sending their fieldwork applications to companies. Because most companies receive students from various universities and colleges at almost the same time, the students suggested that CBE should make the letters available to companies or to students preferably two to three months earlier to facilitate the possibility of securing spaces for them. Students reported that the delay had caused some students to start their fieldwork very late. Some diploma students narrated examples of their fellow students who began their fieldwork after others had finished because of failure to find a placement at the expected time because places had been filled by students from other higher learning institutions. This is confirmed by Makumba (2010) who reported that fieldwork students in Tanzania encountered many challenges in securing fieldwork placements, which resulted into either missed fieldwork or fieldwork that was done late. It is, therefore, obvious that the College needs better strategies in helping its students to find placements in companies instead of leaving much of that responsibility in students’ hands.

#### **4.4 Need for fieldwork orientation to students**

Most of the students in their various courses stated that they had not received any official orientation from the College for their practical placements. The common practice for the majority of students was to see an announcement on the College noticeboard directing them to pick their fieldwork letters from their respective heads of departments, find a prospective placement, give the field letters to organizations, collect their letters of acceptance and then report the details of their placements to the head of department to enable supervisors (lecturers) to visit them. Students expressed concern over the lack of formal orientation and believed that the orientation would have made a positive difference if they knew workplaces’ expectations before they started their fieldwork. However, there were two students from the Department of Procurement and Supplies Management who said that one of their subject lecturers spent some minutes out of one of his teaching sessions to give them tips on how to behave and what to expect in the placement organizations before they left for fieldwork (for which they were very appreciative).

The issue of students going to fieldwork unprepared was one of the constraints for fieldwork management in higher learning institutions identified by Munishi (2016) as one of the bottlenecks for fieldwork success in the higher learning institutions in Tanzania. It is therefore, clear that students need more preparation and support on how to make their fieldwork a better learning experience rather than just fulfilling an academic requirement for their studies.

#### **4.5 Timing for lecturers’ field visits**

All the students felt that the supervising lecturers came to their placements very late, normally within the last two weeks of the six weeks (for diploma students) or eight weeks (for bachelor degree students) they stayed at the practising organizations. They thought if the lecturers visited them earlier, they would make up for the lack of orientation from the College and that would help them to perform better at their workplaces. Students proposed that the lecturers should visit them at least twice, first within the first two weeks of their fieldwork and second, towards the end of the fieldwork, instead of coming just at the end of the fieldwork. This concern implied that students were probably more serious about benefitting from the fieldwork than the College thought. This problem is implied in Munishi’s (2016) findings that fieldwork was poorly organized by many higher learning institutions in Tanzania.

#### **4.6 Students’ Financial Support during Fieldwork**

A few students expressed their challenges of meeting daily financial demands during fieldwork for transport fares and meals accommodation. Some students had received monetary or food support from their fieldwork organizations. Some Bachelor degree students who had been given fieldwork allowance from the government through its Higher Education Students Loan Board (HESLB) still felt the amount they received was not enough for transport and meals. In one focus group discussion, a student came up with a suggestion that parents and guardians should be forced to deposit a certain amount of money to the College for fieldwork cost. The idea was immediately backed by almost all the students. This unanimity suggests that students’ facing financial challenges to support their fieldwork is a reality.

This perspective is confirmed by the findings in Munishi (2016)'s study which found out that fieldwork students in Tanzania were facing many economic hardships including handling transport issues.

#### 4.7 Improvement of Computer Teaching at the College

This theme was passionately and actively discussed by all the students because all of them experienced a reality that every organization they went to needed the use of certain computer programmes in their activities. It seemed that students were not comfortable with computer courses which were more theoretical than practical. Some of them had bitter tones about the computer courses they took at the College saying that they were almost useless. Some of their expressions were such as:

*“We are studying computer just on paper”.*

*“I felt ashamed there because at that time I only knew how to draw a mouse, screen and the like on paper but could not do things until they taught me themselves”.*

One student gave this exaggerated statement:

*“Sir, at this college we go to the computer lab just to learn how to switch a computer on and off”.*

On the serious note, however, students expected the College to put more emphasis on the practical knowledge of the computer in addition to the theoretical knowledge they were being taught. Preston *et al.*(2014) had pinpointed this problematic relationship between classroom coursework and the practical realities students face during fieldwork. The few students who said managed to cope easily with the specialized computer programmes at the workplaces had the advantage of having prior knowledge of computer before joining the College. This finding needs a strong response from the College to examine how their computer studies are taught so as to make sure they strengthen the practical components of the computer studies to enable students function effectively in the workplaces.

#### 4.8 Length of Fieldwork Duration

Almost all students felt the six or eight weeks used for fieldwork were not enough and they proposed to stay for at least three months. They said many employers and supervisors wished they stayed longer at the workplaces. They also said that they needed more time in order to solidify their knowledge and gain confidence for future employment. This view is in harmony with findings by Preston *et al.*(2014) who had found that fieldwork students were not comfortable with the fieldwork short duration as it hindered them from practising sufficiently. This indicates that students have a positive attitude towards fieldwork and they are willing to learn new ideas from the workplaces in order to sharpen their future work skills.

#### 4.9 Fieldwork to Crown Students' College Education

This was another theme discussed widely. Most students argued that it would be very useful for them to go for their fieldwork at the end of their course (i.e. during second year for diploma students and during third year for bachelor degree students) instead of going in the first year as it was custom at CBE. At the time of this study the majority of students at CBE did their fieldwork in their first year of study. For example, all diploma students took six weeks of fieldwork in their first year out of their two years of study and all bachelor degree students practiced their fieldwork for eight weeks in their first year of study. Some students felt that if the fieldwork was the last requirement in their academic work, they would go to the workplaces being strong theoretically and therefore benefit more from their field experience. Others suggested that doing the fieldwork after finishing all other academic work would give them more extended field time and therefore more exposure to the dynamics of the workplaces before their graduation. Also, almost all the students thought if the fieldwork was done at the end of their academic career, it would give them an advantage of being employed right after the fieldwork. Interestingly, the issue of the fieldwork not being well placed within the context of the entire students' programme of study had been recently identified by Preston *et al.*(2014). It was reported that some procurement and supplies management diploma students at one fieldwork station had been formally approached by their company manager to see if they could continue at the company not as fieldwork students but as temporary employees. This observation is in line with the findings of Ishengoma and Vaaland (2016) who found that fieldwork is perceived to maximize students' employability in Tanzania. It would, therefore, be important for the College to plan the fieldwork programme by taking advantage of the positivity about fieldwork students found in the companies to help the students get employed easily.

### 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 5.1 Conclusions

Generally, from this study it can be concluded that fieldwork is still considered important by the students of the College of Business Education, Dar es Salaam campus, as a way to prepare them for their future career. Specifically,

on the basis of the objectives of this study, the following three conclusions can be made: (1) most of the students who participated in the study had positive attitudes and experiences about fieldwork (e.g. they said they liked the idea of having fieldwork as part of their studies and they received positive support from their company supervisors and colleagues) (2) it was clear from the respondents that most students were facing various challenges during their fieldwork (e.g. mismatch between theory and practice and lack of finance for their upkeep) (3) it was obvious that there were things that students deemed important about fieldwork practices (such as the need to have a more extended time for fieldwork than it was being practised at CBE and also that fieldwork should be done at the end of their study programmes).

## 5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this qualitative study, there are three general recommendations to be noted by students' fieldwork stakeholders at CBE or other higher learning institutions as may be applicable to their specific situations. First, students should be given fieldwork orientation before they go to the companies in order to help them cope with the expected new work environment and participate effectively in their fieldwork. Second, fieldwork students should be visited by their lecturers early enough to facilitate their learning and performance at the host organizations. Third, higher learning institutions should make it their deliberate point to plan well their academic programmes and respond to students' needs that affect the way they conduct fieldwork. Such things include the need for institutions to conduct relevant courses to reduce the mismatch between theory and practice, giving students ample time for doing their fieldwork so they can benefit more from the fieldwork, providing fieldwork letters to host organizations some months before students actually go for fieldwork and having fieldwork well placed within the students' programme of study. Addressing such issues may assist in creating fieldwork educational experiences that will benefit the fieldwork students as well as the fieldwork host organisations.

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