



The Redesign of Internships in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Table of Contents

Introduction	2
The Summer Internship	2
The Need for Redesign	3
Learning Objectives	4
Process Steps for Redesign	4
Outcomes	5
Roles and Responsibilities of the Field Mentor	6
Roles and Responsibilities of the Faculty Mentor	6
Illustrative Projects	7
Learnings and Conclusion	8

1. Introduction

The M.A Development program offered by the Azim Premji University is a two year full time programme that aims at building the capacity of students to become reflective development practitioners. The program considers the field as an important site of development knowledge and field practice is an essential component of the curricular objectives of the program. The program has three critical field engagement components: a 2-week field immersion, a 6 weeks summer internship and 8 weeks of independent winter field project. However, due to the safety precautions and lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic, it was not possible for students to complete a summer internship. Therefore, the university redesigned the field internship into an online internship in partnership with field organizations in different parts of the country.

This is a time of serious disruptions at all levels of our society. Converting the usual field internship into a virtual one has allowed our M.A. Development students to not only learn and gain experience but also contribute directly to the social sector's response to the ongoing humanitarian, healthcare and social crisis.

This document captures learnings from this exercise. We hope that this document will provide some guidance for other education programs with similar field practice components. This document can also offer some insights to social sector organizations on different modes of engaging with interns as the crisis is changing our regular way of functioning.

2. The Summer Internship

Under normal circumstances, the summer internship provides opportunities to students to experience on-the-ground development actions by being part of programmatic activities of NGOs, collectives, social movements and other field organisations. In normal circumstances, students travel to different locations where our partner organizations are working, and spend 6 weeks in the field interacting with communities, field staff, local government bodies, various

institutions etc. Examples of development interventions include state or non-state programmes in livelihoods, sustainability, public health and other domains of work, policy advocacy, social movements, strengthening community-based institutions, and innovative solutions to current social development challenges. Students do the summer internship under the direct guidance of a mentor from the field organisation and a faculty member, and their work and learning are graded jointly by both mentors.

The typical batch size is about 180 students. The School reaches out to a diverse set of organisations to identify projects suitable for internships, with a good spread across geographies, demographics, and nature of interventions. The students are matched with potential projects based on their interests and the requirements of partner organisations.

3. The Need for Redesign

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic and resultant lockdowns, there was no possibility for the students to work in the field locations in person. The internship carries significant academic weight, equivalent to two elective courses in the program. Thus, the internships had to be redesigned to be operationalized through a virtual mode, yet meet the learning objectives.

At the same time, the pandemic and lockdown had also compelled social sector organizations to modify their immediate priorities and mode of engagement with communities as well as resource planning. Almost all of them provided humanitarian and healthcare support to people affected by the crisis. Many were engaging with the migrants who had returned to their native places; and many were working with the government on implementation of welfare programs such as MGNREGA, PDS, and others. Travel restrictions and social distancing norms had made most of these organizations also move towards a virtual mode of work, especially where their teams were spread in multiple locations. The organizations wanted students to intern either in some of their ongoing projects where there was a scope for distance mode arrangements or in their pandemic response activities.

4. Learning Objectives

The original objectives of our regular onsite internship are:

1. Enhance experiential understanding of development action processes in an organizational and community context
2. Critical reflections on the challenges of development actions

To accommodate the distance-mode nature of engagement by students this year, the objectives were tweaked to enhance an analytical understanding of development actions/interventions by situating these in the organizational context/its strategies and modes of intervention. This allowed them to understand routine interventions in the context of how they had to reorient strategies under extraordinary circumstances like COVID-19.

The revised objectives were:

1. Understand and analyse development actions as a response to specific development concerns
2. Explain the strategies underlying certain actions, describe the modes of interventions and analyse their implications
3. Illustrate how interventions are situated in the organizational and policy context

5. Process Steps for Redesign

The list below summarizes the key steps we took:

- The university reached out to 100+ development organizations to assess their interest, feasibility and willingness in engaging with student interns in a distance mode. Many of these organizations had hosted our student interns in previous years. But we also identified several new organizations as some of our usual partners were unable to offer virtual mode internships.

- 70+ organizations not only were willing to offer virtual internships but actively suggested ways of operationalizing the internships through distance modes because they saw this as an opportunity for interns to help them with their current work including organizations' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- We asked each organization to indicate the number of students they could host, specific expectations from students (eg: language requirement or specific skills) and the details of the projects that students could be involved in.
- Based on these discussions, the university identified specific modalities of the internships: Online orientations by the organizations, phone interactions with communities and others, documenting analysis and writing up.
- These modalities required a functional laptop, internet connectivity and phone as well as a space to work. Therefore, it was essential to understand students' access to these devices and internet networks, and working space. For this purpose, the university surveyed every student and identified students who required support. This included small financial support for repairing laptops, topping up internet plans, etc. In a few cases, where students' family situation did not allow for a quiet space to work, the university helped them find and rent rooms close to their homes.
- Each student was allocated a faculty mentor from the University and a field mentor from the host organization. The internship was jointly mentored and assessed by the organization mentor and the faculty.
- Students going to the same organization have the same faculty mentor for better coordination and facilitation

6. Outcomes

The list below summarizes the outcomes of these steps:

- As a result of this effort, all students were allocated to 67 organizations,

with each organization hosting 2-4 students.

- The allocations were done keeping in mind i) the domain interests of students, ii) specific skill requirements by the host organization, and iii) language or any other criteria suggested by the organization
- These development organizations ranged from agricultural farm labourers' unions, advocacy-based organizations, grassroots organizations to cooperatives spread in 18 states.
- Most of the projects focused on organisational work and needs with respect to impact of Covid-19, lockdown and emergent consequences, in line with organisational priorities.

7. Roles and Responsibilities of the Field Mentor

Given that the nature of the work and engagement with students was online, the most critical role was that of the mentor in the organization. The mentor was responsible for:

- Developing a work plan for 6 weeks along with the student
- Guiding the student during the work and also providing periodic feedback
- Helping students deal with any issues they face during the internship
- Assessment and grading of the students' work at the end of the internship
- Coordinating with the field practice team and faculty mentor at the University, as needed

8. Roles and Responsibilities of the Faculty Mentor

Each student was assigned a faculty mentor to provide overall guidance during the summer internship. The faculty mentor was expected to ensure the following:

- The student understands the purpose, learning objectives, the process, and requirements of the internship
- The student develops a work plan with sufficient clarity, in consultation with field mentors (and others concerned in the organization)

- Hold weekly meetings (virtually) with the students to discuss the progress of work and provide feedback as needed
- Ensuring that the student submits all reports and other assessment components on time
- Ensuring that the student understands organizational requirements and expectations and undertakes the internship with due integrity
- Assessment and grading of the students' work at the end of the internship

Faculty mentors were expected to be in touch with field mentors periodically to assess students' progress.

9. Illustrative Projects

Few illustrative projects as shared by different organizations were:

- Media Support, Research and Documentation:
 - Writing migrant stories and creating a combined compendium for their website and other reports.
 - Working on a policy-based concept note on economic development (heritage and tourism) with the organisation's policy team.
 - The Key deliverables of this project were a compendium of Migrant Stories and a Concept Note.
- Data Support, Analytics and Reporting:
 - Working in coordination with the State COVID Control Room team on cleaning up the smart city data and generating cleaned up data sets for skill-mapping.
 - Source-destination mapping of migrants using sampling, urban analytics and economic agglomeration to understand the pattern of migration and agglomeration in different districts.
 - Creating a concept note on sustainable agriculture together with the organisation's team.
 - Key deliverables were a Data analytics weekly report with graphs and maps; and a concept note on sustainable agriculture

- Designing and doing a phone survey on implementation of NREGA and the National Food Security Act and the problems faced by the agricultural workers:
 - Help them file complaints on their problems online and then follow up on the complaints through phone calls to government agencies.
- Documenting (through phone calls) the experiences of migrant workers, tea garden workers and other workers during and after lockdown.
- Helping organise campaigns for people's demands by designing posters, placards, WhatsApp messages etc for them. Helping organise and implement online training on rights and entitlements for their members.
- Developing an employment roadmap around revival and strengthening of forest-based livelihoods through linking of community-driven Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) management to industrial value chains.
- Planning and conceptualization of an independent Industry Cell, to support the idea of "Rural Industrialisation" through the promotion of MSMEs in Jharkhand for the Dept. of Industries.
- Making fact sheets and proposal documents for the Main Bhi Dilli Campaign for democratizing the master planning process of Delhi 2021-41
- Campaign for Inclusive cities for Homeless and homeless policy

10. Learnings and Conclusion

Several learnings may be noted from this exercise.

The keenness of the development organisations to engage students in internships must be appreciated amidst the huge challenges they were facing to respond to the Covid-19 situation internally and in their work with the communities.

As we started conversing with the organisations, both the organisations and the

university realised the potential of engaging the students to do work on the current issues faced by the organisations, in particular, with respect to the fall out of Covid-19 and lockdown, thereby making the internship a very topical and relevant learning opportunity for students.

We realised that even while working at a distance, the students individually and collectively had opportunities to systematically learn several aspects of this profound crisis.

While a remote internship is certainly not the ideal one to gain practical experience, the exercise helped us in finding out the next best option, not compromising with the broad learning experience, and credit requirements.

We also learnt that even an established academic curriculum can be flexibly and effectively used even in this pandemic situation to positively impact students' learning.

This is a time of serious disruptions at all levels of our society. As a University working closely with the social sector, we realized the magnitude of the crisis and the need for coming up with innovative solutions to many of the challenges. The Azim Premji University prepares students to become reflective development practitioners. The revised online summer internship for our M.A. Development students was a step towards that as the entire batch of around 180 students worked with social sector organizations, learning as well as directly contributing to critical responses to the humanitarian, healthcare and social crisis.

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