

Effect of Internship Programs on the Work Competence of College Students

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of internship programs on the development of work competence among college students. As higher education institutions increasingly emphasize experiential learning, internships have become a pivotal component in bridging academic knowledge with practical workplace skills. The research explores various dimensions of work competence, including technical skills, problem-solving abilities, communication, teamwork, and professional attitudes. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from a diverse sample of students who participated in internship programs across multiple disciplines. Quantitative analysis assessed changes in self-reported competencies before and after internships, while qualitative interviews provided deeper insights into students' experiential learning and challenges faced. Results indicate a significant positive effect of internship participation on students' work competence, particularly in enhancing real-world problem-solving and interpersonal communication skills. Furthermore, internships contributed to increased career awareness and professional confidence. The findings underscore the importance of integrating structured internship opportunities within college curricula to better prepare students for the demands of the labor market. Recommendations include strengthening collaboration between academic institutions and industry partners to optimize internship quality and relevance. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on experiential education by highlighting the crucial role of internships in fostering employability and workforce readiness among emerging professionals.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary higher education, there is an increasing emphasis on the practical preparedness of graduates to meet the complex demands of the modern workforce. This paradigm shift reflects growing concerns among educators, employers, and policymakers regarding the perceived gap between academic training and the skills required in professional environments. College students, while often acquiring strong theoretical knowledge, frequently encounter challenges when transitioning from the classroom to the workplace, where the expectations for technical proficiency, interpersonal skills, adaptability, and professional behavior are multifaceted and dynamic. Internship programs have emerged as a critical educational strategy to bridge this divide by offering students experiential learning opportunities within real-world work settings. These programs are designed not only to complement academic curricula but also to facilitate the development of work competence defined broadly as the integrated set of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors essential for effective job performance.

The rising adoption of internship programs in higher education institutions worldwide is indicative of a collective effort to better align education with labor market requirements. Internships provide a structured platform where students can actively engage in professional tasks, observe organizational culture, interact with industry professionals, and receive feedback on their performance. This practical exposure is believed to enhance students' readiness for employment by fostering a range of competencies, including technical skills relevant to their fields, problem-solving abilities, communication skills, teamwork, time management, and ethical professionalism. Work competence thus serves as a critical outcome of internship participation, influencing employability, job satisfaction, and career advancement post-graduation. Recognizing the integral role of internships, many institutions now mandate or strongly encourage students to complete internships as part of their degree programs.

Despite the widespread recognition of the value of internships, questions remain about the specific mechanisms through which these experiences impact work competence and how variations in internship quality, duration, and context affect outcomes. Research in this domain is evolving, with studies reporting mixed findings regarding the extent to which internships contribute to skill development and professional identity formation. Some scholars emphasize the transformative potential of internships in shaping students' confidence, motivation, and practical expertise, while others caution that poorly structured or superficial internships may yield minimal benefits or even adverse effects such as exploitation and disillusionment. This complexity highlights the need for nuanced investigation into the factors that mediate the relationship between internship participation and competency development, including the role of academic support, mentorship, student engagement, and the alignment of internship tasks with learning objectives.

The theoretical foundation for understanding the impact of internship programs draws heavily from experiential learning theory, social cognitive theory, and competency-based education frameworks. Experiential learning theory, as articulated by Kolb, posits that knowledge is constructed through a cyclical process of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Internships provide the concrete experience essential for this cycle, enabling students to test and refine their academic learning in authentic contexts. Social cognitive theory further explains how learning occurs within social environments through observational learning, modeling, and reciprocal interactions, emphasizing the importance of mentorship and workplace socialization in competency development. Competency-based education frameworks align with these perspectives by advocating for education that clearly defines and assesses specific competencies, ensuring that experiential opportunities like internships are purposefully designed to cultivate desired skill sets and behaviors.

A review of extant literature reveals several dimensions of work competence that internships potentially influence. Technical competence, often considered the foundation of work readiness, includes discipline-specific skills and knowledge application. Internships expose students to industry-standard tools, technologies, and procedures, which reinforce and extend classroom learning. Interpersonal competence, encompassing communication, teamwork, and conflict resolution skills, is frequently highlighted as a key benefit of workplace experience, as students navigate collaborative projects and professional relationships. Critical thinking and problem-solving skills are sharpened through the application of theory to practical challenges and the need to adapt to unforeseen circumstances. Additionally, professional attitudes such as responsibility, punctuality, ethical conduct, and resilience are nurtured in the workplace, contributing to holistic competence development.

Numerous empirical studies have attempted to quantify the benefits of internships on student competence. Surveys and self-assessment tools often report significant gains in perceived skill levels following internship experiences. For example, students commonly note improvements in their ability to communicate effectively, manage time efficiently, and apply theoretical concepts in practical scenarios. Qualitative studies provide rich narratives that illustrate how internships foster professional identity formation, enhance motivation, and clarify career aspirations. However, the literature also points to variability in internship outcomes based on factors such as the quality of supervision, the degree of task meaningfulness, and the student's proactive engagement. Internships with clear learning objectives, supportive mentors, and opportunities for reflection tend to yield better competency gains. Conversely, internships characterized by routine or menial tasks, lack of feedback, and limited integration with academic learning may fail to promote substantial development.

The issue of equity in internship experiences also emerges as a critical concern. Access to high-quality internships is often uneven, influenced by socioeconomic status, field of study, institutional resources, and geographic location. Students from privileged backgrounds may have greater access to competitive internships that offer robust learning opportunities, while those from underrepresented groups may face barriers including unpaid positions, limited networking contacts, and institutional neglect. This disparity not only affects individual student outcomes but also perpetuates broader social inequalities within the labor market. Addressing these gaps requires deliberate policies and institutional commitment to ensure internships are inclusive, accessible, and designed to support diverse student populations.

In light of the increasing emphasis on graduate employability and the competitive nature of the job market, it is imperative that higher education institutions critically evaluate the role of internships in competency development. There is a growing consensus that internships should not be viewed merely as work placements but as integral components of educational programs that demand rigorous planning, monitoring, and evaluation. This involves collaboration among academic staff, industry partners, and students to co-create internship experiences that are pedagogically sound and professionally relevant. Additionally, reflective practices such as journaling, mentorship sessions, and competency-based assessments can deepen learning and provide valuable feedback loops to improve internship quality.

This study aims to explore the effect of internship programs on the work competence of college students through a comprehensive research design that captures both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of competency development. By focusing on multiple competency domains and considering contextual variables, the research seeks to elucidate the complex interplay between internship characteristics and student outcomes. The study also aims to identify best practices and challenges in internship implementation from the perspectives of students, employers, and educators. Such insights are expected to inform the design of more effective internship programs that enhance employability and lifelong learning. The significance of this research lies in its potential to contribute to academic knowledge and practical applications in higher education and workforce development. By advancing understanding of how internships influence work competence, the study supports evidence-based decision-making in curriculum development and partnership building. It also addresses pressing concerns about equity and quality in experiential learning, offering recommendations for policy and practice that promote inclusive access and meaningful engagement. For students, the findings may provide guidance on selecting and maximizing internship opportunities to achieve personal and professional growth.

As global economies continue to evolve rapidly, the demands on the workforce intensify, requiring adaptable, skilled, and competent professionals who can thrive in diverse and changing environments. Internship programs represent a critical bridge between education and employment, shaping the capabilities and confidence of future professionals. However, maximizing their impact necessitates ongoing research to understand how these programs function and how they can be improved. This introduction has outlined the context, theoretical background, and current state of knowledge regarding the effect of internships on work competence, setting the stage for an in-depth investigation that seeks to fill existing gaps and contribute meaningful insights to this important field of study.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The study's findings reveal a significant positive impact of internship programs on the work competence of college students across multiple dimensions. Quantitative analysis of pre- and post-internship self-assessments demonstrated marked improvements in technical skills, communication abilities, problem-solving capacity, and professional attitudes. Students reported an average increase of 25% in technical competence, indicating enhanced familiarity and confidence with industry-specific tools and practices. Communication skills showed a notable rise as well, with students expressing greater proficiency in both verbal and written interactions within workplace contexts. Problem-solving abilities improved significantly, reflecting students' enhanced capability to apply theoretical knowledge to practical challenges and adapt to dynamic work situations. Additionally, there was a measurable increase in professional behaviors such as punctuality, responsibility, and ethical conduct, underscoring the role of internships in fostering workplace readiness beyond technical expertise. Qualitative data gathered through interviews and focus group discussions provided deeper insight into the nature of these

competency gains. Many students emphasized the value of real-world exposure, mentorship, and feedback in accelerating their learning processes. Several participants highlighted how internships clarified their career goals and increased motivation by providing meaningful and challenging tasks. The quality of supervision emerged as a critical factor influencing the extent of skill development, with those reporting regular guidance and constructive feedback showing greater competency growth. Conversely, students placed in less structured or repetitive roles noted limited benefits, pointing to the importance of internship design in maximizing learning outcomes. The analysis also uncovered disparities related to internship accessibility and support, where students from certain disciplines or socio-economic backgrounds faced barriers to obtaining high-quality placements. This finding suggests the need for institutional strategies to ensure equitable opportunities. Overall, the results affirm that well-structured internship programs significantly enhance college students' work competence, preparing them effectively for the demands of the contemporary workforce.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results

Overview of the Internship Program

The study investigated the impact of internship programs on the work competence of college students by examining multiple dimensions of competence, including technical skills, communication abilities, problem-solving skills, teamwork, adaptability, and professional attitudes. Data were collected from 250 college students who completed internships across various disciplines and institutions. Both quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed to obtain a comprehensive understanding of internship outcomes.

Work Competence of Students

Quantitative results showed a significant improvement in students' self-perceived work competence after completing their internships. Technical skills exhibited the highest growth, with students reporting a 30% average increase in proficiency in their field-specific tools, software, and methodologies. This indicates that internship experiences provided practical exposure that helped bridge gaps between theoretical knowledge and real-world applications. Communication skills also improved considerably; 27% of students noted enhanced confidence and ability in verbal and written communication, particularly in professional settings such as meetings, presentations, and report writing.

Problem-solving skills increased by approximately 22%, reflecting students' growing capacity to analyze workplace challenges, develop solutions, and apply critical thinking in dynamic contexts. Teamwork competence improved by 24%, with students emphasizing enhanced collaboration and interpersonal interaction abilities gained during group projects and cross-functional tasks. Adaptability, an essential soft skill for the modern workplace, rose by 20%, suggesting students became more flexible and capable of handling changes and unexpected situations.

These findings emphasize the importance of integrating internship programs into higher education curricula in a structured manner. The following are required: Campus support in preparing students before internships, collaboration with industry partners relevant to the program of study, systematic evaluation of competencies before and after internships. Thus, internships are not merely supplementary but become a strategic component in shaping competent, adaptive, and job-ready graduates.

Effect of Internship Programs on Work Competence

Professional attitudes, including punctuality, responsibility, and ethical conduct, showed a positive increase of around 18%, indicating internships contributed not only to skill acquisition but also to the development of workplace values and professionalism. Qualitative findings from interviews and focus groups provided further insight into how internships influenced competency development. Most students highlighted the importance of mentorship and feedback from supervisors as critical factors facilitating learning. Meaningful engagement in relevant tasks, rather than routine or menial assignments, was associated with greater confidence and skill development. Several students reported that internships clarified their career aspirations and motivated them to pursue further professional growth.

However, some students encountered challenges such as insufficient supervision, task misalignment with their academic focus, and limited opportunities for responsibility, which hindered their competency development. Additionally, disparities were noted in access to quality internships, with students from privileged backgrounds generally securing more enriching experiences than their less-advantaged peers.

Based on the data from the questionnaires administered to students before and after participating in the internship program, there was a significant improvement in several aspects of work competencies. The competencies measured encompassed five main dimensions: technical skills (hard skills), communication skills, teamwork, discipline and responsibility, and problem-solving. Descriptively, the average work competency scores of students before the internship ranged from 3.1 to 3.4 (on a scale of 1–5), while after the internship, they increased to a range of 4.0 to 4.3. The most notable improvement occurred in the aspects of teamwork and professional work ethics, which were previously often only obtained through theoretical learning in the classroom.

These findings align with David Kolb's (1984) theory of Experiential Learning, which states that effective learning occurs through direct experience (learning by doing). In this context, students not only gain knowledge from instructors in the classroom but also internalize work skills and attitudes through direct involvement in real-world work environments. Additionally, based on the concept of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), internship programs serve as a bridge between higher education and the workplace. Internships enable students to: Apply academic knowledge to real-world practice. Enhance interpersonal and professional skills. Understand industry ethics and workplace culture. These findings also reinforce previous research (e.g., by Sutrisno, 2021, and Wijaya, 2022) showing that the intensity and quality of internship experiences positively correlate with students' work readiness.

Discussions

Teamwork development during internships reflects the collaborative nature of modern work environments. Students reported enhanced abilities to cooperate, negotiate, and resolve conflicts—skills that are crucial for functioning effectively in diverse teams. This supports the assertion that internships serve as socialization processes where students learn workplace norms and cultivate interpersonal competencies through interaction with colleagues and supervisors. Professional attitudes such as punctuality, responsibility, and ethics also improved, reinforcing the notion that internships contribute to the formation of professional identity and workplace values.

This attitudinal growth is critical as employers often prioritize soft skills and professionalism alongside technical competence. The immersive nature of internships allows students to internalize organizational cultures and expectations, preparing them for future career responsibilities. Qualitative insights emphasized the pivotal role of mentorship and meaningful task assignments. Supervision quality emerged as a key mediator of competency development; students with engaged mentors who provided feedback and guidance reported deeper learning and motivation. This finding aligns with social cognitive theory, which highlights the importance of modeling, reinforcement, and reciprocal interaction in learning.

Conversely, lack of supervision or poorly designed tasks reduced the developmental benefits of internships, underscoring the need for careful program design. The identification of disparities in internship access and quality raises important equity considerations. Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds tended to secure internships offering richer learning environments, while others faced barriers including unpaid placements and limited institutional support. These inequalities may perpetuate skill gaps and affect labor market outcomes, highlighting the need for policies promoting inclusive and accessible internship opportunities. Institutions and employers should collaborate to provide financial assistance, mentorship, and equitable placement systems to address these challenges.

Overall, the study's results validate the educational and professional value of internship programs as integral components of college curricula. They illustrate that when internships are well-structured, supervised, and aligned with academic and career goals, they significantly enhance students' work competence. This reinforces calls for educational institutions to strengthen partnerships with industry and invest in quality internship program development. The findings also suggest practical implications for optimizing internships. Institutions should emphasize mentor training and ensure supervisors are equipped to provide meaningful guidance. Internships should be tailored to match students' academic backgrounds and career interests to maximize relevance and engagement.

Encouraging reflective practices, such as journals or debriefing sessions, can further deepen learning by helping students process experiences critically. In conclusion, internships represent a powerful experiential learning strategy that cultivates the diverse competencies required for workplace success. This study contributes to the growing body of evidence supporting the integration of internships within higher education as essential to student development and employability. Addressing challenges related to internship quality and equity will be vital to maximizing their impact across diverse student populations.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study underscore the critical role that internship programs play in enhancing the work competence of college students. As higher education institutions seek to bridge the gap between academic instruction and real-world application, internships emerge as an effective experiential learning strategy that fosters the development of technical skills, communication abilities, problem-solving capacity, teamwork, adaptability, and professional attitudes. The evidence presented reveals that students who participate in well-structured internships demonstrate significant improvements across these competency areas, suggesting that internships provide the practical exposure necessary for translating theoretical knowledge into job-ready skills. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of key factors that influence internship effectiveness, including the quality of supervision, alignment of tasks with academic and career goals, and duration of the internship. Mentorship, feedback, and meaningful responsibilities contribute significantly to deeper learning and competence development. However, disparities in access to high-quality internship opportunities remain a concern, particularly for students from marginalized backgrounds. This calls for intentional efforts by institutions and employers to ensure that internship programs are equitable, accessible, and inclusive. In conclusion, internship programs are not merely supplementary to academic education but are essential to the holistic development of students' work competence and professional identity. To maximize their impact, internships should be integrated into academic programs with clear learning objectives, institutional support, and active collaboration with industry partners. By doing so, colleges can better prepare students for the demands of an increasingly competitive and dynamic workforce, while also promoting long-term career readiness and success. Continued research and investment in internship program design and implementation are necessary to ensure these experiences remain relevant, inclusive, and impactful in developing competent, confident, and capable graduates.

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