ICMEB Proceeding of the International Conference on Management, Entrepreneurship, and Business

E-ISSN:3090-9155
P-ISSN:XXXX-XXXX

Research Article

Effectiveness of Internships Bridging Education and Industry: An Evaluation Based an a Qualitative Study

Dimas Yoga Prasetya[1*], Chandra Fitra Arifianto[2], Ading Sunarto[3]

[1-3] Department of Management, University of Pamulang, Indonesia
* Corresponding Author : e-mail : dosen01177@unpam.ac.id

Abstract: Internships are believed to be an appropriate way to bridge education with the world of work, or link and match. This study focuses on the effectiveness of internships in higher education. This type of qualitative research takes the form of a case study, which aims to obtain an in-depth exploration of events. Informants were determined using a purposive sampling technique based on certain characteristics deemed relevant to the research objectives, resulting in the involvement of five informants and one key informant. Data collection was obtained through interviews and observations supported by other data. Data analysis was conducted descriptively qualitatively through the stages of reduction, presentation, and drawing conclusions, followed by data triangulation. The results of the study indicate that three main indicators task relevance, supervision quality, and institutional support comprehensively explain the conditions experienced by informants. Specifically, internship programs have proven effective in strengthening soft skills such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, and self-confidence; enhancing job readiness through experiences facing real-world challenges and organizational culture; and fostering a professional ethos. Thus, this study provides a theoretical contribution by strengthening the framework for internship effectiveness, as well as a practical contribution in the form of recommendations for universities and industry partners to design internship programs that are more structured, relevant, and aligned with students' fields of study and the needs of the workplace.

Keywords: Adaptability; Communication Skills; Internship Effectiveness; Job Readiness; Supervision Quality

Received: May 19, 2025
Revised: July 18, 2025
Accepted: September 17, 2025
Published: November 18, 2025
Curr. Ver.: November 18, 2025

1. Introduction

Higher education plays a central role in preparing young people to face global challenges. Universities serve not only as centers for knowledge transfer but also as platforms for developing practical skills, professional ethics, and job readiness. In the context of globalization, workforce needs are undergoing a significant transformation: theoretical competence is no longer sufficient; it must be supported by practical skills and real-world work experience Jackson & Bridgstock (2021). This situation has encouraged universities worldwide, including Indonesia, to emphasize the integration of academic learning with practical experience through internship programs.

Internships are seen as an effective form of experiential learning that connects students with the professional world. This program allows students to apply theory to real-world practice in the industry, while also developing social skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adapting to organizational culture Ferns et al., (2016). Similarly, the development of soft skills has been widely recognized as one of the most valuable outcomes of internship programs, as employers increasingly prioritize competencies such as communication, adaptability, and teamwork over purely technical knowledge (Jackson, 2016; Jackson & Wilton, 2016).

In Indonesia, the urgency of internships has increased with the implementation of the Independent Learning–Independent Campus (or Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka-MBKM) policy, which encourages students to gain learning experiences outside of campus, including through industrial internships (Suarman & Arifianto, 2022). This program provides students with opportunities to gain learning experiences outside of campus, including through industry internships. This policy aims to narrow the gap between graduate competencies and job market demands (Direktorat Jenderal Pendidikan Tinggi, 2020). However, research indicates that challenges remain. Several studies have found a gap between students' expectations and the realities of the workplace during internships. For example, Jackson (2016) noted that students often face assignments that are not entirely relevant to their field of study, which impacts their perceived effectiveness of internships. Several studies have also shown that weak university supervision in overseeing the internship process results in suboptimal evaluation and feedback received by students. A study by Maertz Jr et al., (2014) emphasized that internship success is heavily influenced by the quality of supervision from both the university and the company. A similar finding was confirmed in recent research, which found that unstructured communication and feedback between students, supervisors, and educational institutions are key challenges to internship effectiveness (Schneider et al., 2024).

The university implements a curriculum that combines theory, problem-solving, and industrial lectures. Students are guaranteed internship opportunities at partner companies, as well as opportunities for work engagements. Internal data shows an increase in the number of student internship participants and an expansion of the number of work units involved. This indicates the university's increasing commitment to preparing work-ready graduates. These findings align with research by Narayanan et al., (2017), which emphasized that internship success depends heavily on a balance between task relevance, quality guidance, and institutional support.

However, the effectiveness of an internship program cannot be measured solely by the number of participants or work units involved. More importantly, it is the students' substantive benefits from the experience. Effectiveness is closely related to improved technical skills, mental readiness, and the development of a professional work ethic (Silva et al., 2016). Therefore, research focused on evaluating internship effectiveness is relevant to answer the question: to what extent are internship programs in universities truly able to bridge education with industry needs?

The purpose of this research is to identify and evaluate the effectiveness of student internship programs in higher education. A qualitative approach was used through case studies to explore the experiences of students and stakeholders in depth. The analysis encompasses not only input aspects (student readiness and institutional support), but also processes (mentorship, task relevance, work environment), and outputs (skills mastery, job readiness, and professional experience). Therefore, this research is expected to provide theoretical contributions to the literature on internship effectiveness and practical benefits for improving internship policies in Indonesia. The objectives of this study are to:

a. Identify factors influencing the effectiveness of internship programs in higher education.
b. Evaluate the internship implementation process, including task relevance, quality of supervision, and work environment.
c. Analyze internship program outputs in terms of technical skills, soft skills, job readiness, and professional ethos.
d. Provide practical recommendations for higher education institutions and industry partners in designing more relevant and structured internship programs that meet the needs of the workplace.

2. Literature Review

Internships as a Form of Experiential Learning

Internships are considered a primary form of experiential learning. Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning explains that effective learning occurs through a four-stage cycle: concrete experience, reflection, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. In the context of an internship, students gain concrete experience in the workplace, reflect on that experience, connect it to the theory learned in class, and then test it in a real-world setting (Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

Ferns et al., (2016) emphasize that internships enable students to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Through internships, students develop not only technical skills relevant to their field of study, but also social skills (soft skills) such as communication, teamwork,

problem-solving, and the ability to adapt to organizational culture. These soft skills are increasingly important as they are one of the key indicators sought by employers (Jackson, 2016; Jackson & Wilton, 2016).

Furthermore, Narayanan et al., (2017) developed a model of internship effectiveness that emphasizes three main aspects: (1) input including student readiness, institutional support, and company characteristics; (2) process including mentorship quality, task relevance, and workplace interactions; and (3) output consisting of technical skills, job readiness, and professional experience. This model has been widely used as a reference in research on the effectiveness of internship programs in various countries.

Internship Effectiveness from an International Perspective

Research in various countries shows that internships contribute positively to graduate employability, although these benefits are strongly influenced by the quality of the internship experience itself (Silva et al., 2016; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021). The most important determining factors are the relevance of the assignment, the quality of supervision, and ongoing institutional support (Maertz Jr. et al., 2014). However, several studies also highlight challenges that often arise, particularly the mismatch between students' fields of study and the internship assignments, which results in low satisfaction and low skill acquisition (Gault et al., 2010).

This article's contribution lies in addressing this debate in the Indonesian context, emphasizing how task relevance, supervision quality, and institutional support interact to influence student experiences. Thus, this research enriches the international literature with qualitative evidence from the implementation of the MBKM policy, a unique framework in Indonesia for bridging higher education with industry needs.

Conceptual Research Framework

Based on the literature above, it can be concluded that internship effectiveness is influenced by the interaction between input, process, and output factors (Narayanan et al., 2017). In the context of this study, the conceptual framework used consists of three main components: input, which includes student readiness (knowledge, motivation, and initial skills), university support (pre-internship briefing and monitoring), and the characteristics of partner companies; process, which involves the quality of supervision from industry mentors and academic supervisors, the relevance of assigned tasks to the field of study, and the work environment; and output, which includes the technical skills acquired, improved soft skills, mental readiness for work, and the development of a professional work ethic. Through this framework, the study aims to evaluate the extent to which internship programs in universities can effectively function as a bridge between education and industry.

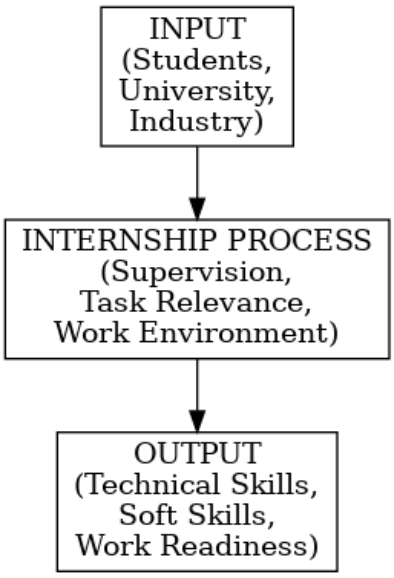

Figure 1. Conceptual framework
Source: Narayanan et al., (2017)

3. Research Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method to gain a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of the student internship program as a bridge between education and industry. This approach allows researchers to explore the experiences, perceptions, and meanings of students, supervisors, and industrial mentors in a real-life context. The research location is one of the universities in Indonesia that offers an integrated internship program within its curriculum. This university was chosen because it has an institutional policy that makes internships a mandatory part of the curriculum, has established extensive partnerships with various industries, and has demonstrated a year-over-year increase in the number of internship participants. These conditions provide a relevant context for evaluating the effectiveness of internships and make it a representative example of the implementation of the MBKM program in Indonesia.

Table 1. Informants' Characteristic

Informant type	Age	Role Description	Informant code
Key informant	51 y.o	Internship program coordinator	IK
Main informant 1	22 y.o	Internship student (Human Resources Dept.)	R1
Main informant 2	20 y.o	Internship student (Public Relations and Stakeholders Dept.)	R2
Main informant 3	21 y.o	Internship student (Cooperationn Section)	R3
Main informant 4	22 y.o	Internship student (Applied Institutions Section)	R4
Main informant 5	22 y.o	Internship student (Marketing and Admissions Dept.)	R5

Source: Processing data (2025)

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique to ensure the involvement of relevant informants. There was one key informant, the internship program coordinator, and five key informants, consisting of students (see table 1). Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore participants' perspectives based on the input–process–output framework (Narayanan et al., 2017). Observations were conducted to capture the actual dynamics at the internship site, while documentation in the form of program guidelines, internship reports, and evaluation notes served as supplementary data. The researcher served as the primary research instrument by developing the interview guidelines while maintaining sensitivity to field dynamics.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles et al., (2018), which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. To ensure credibility, source triangulation, method triangulation, and member checking with participants were used. The researchers also upheld research ethics through informed consent and confidentiality of participant identities. Relate to this design, the study is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of how internships can improve students' skills while strengthening relationships between universities and industry.

4. Results and Discussion

This research yields important findings regarding the effectiveness of internship programs as a bridge between education and industry. The analysis was conducted using an input–process–output framework, supplemented by interview excerpts, summary tables, and visualizations to clarify the results. Details see figure 2.

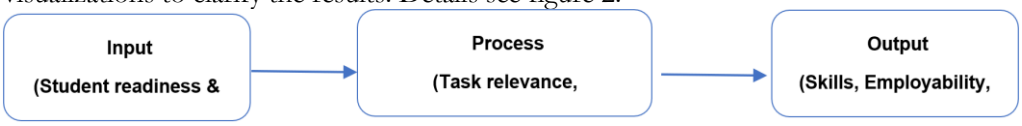

Figure 2. Internship effectiveness model based on research findings
Source: Processing data (2025)

Input: Student Readiness and Institutional Support

Students assessed that pre-internship training provided by universities was quite helpful in terms of work ethic and discipline, but still lacking in providing technical skills relevant to their field of study. A key informant stated:

"The training I received from the university focused more on work ethics. When it comes to technical matters, I learned more directly in the company." (R3)

Nearly all students stated that institutional support in the form of partnerships with industry significantly facilitated access to internships. However, some students complained about a mismatch between their field of study and the work unit where they were placed. This indicates a gap that still needs to be bridged, in line with the findings of Silva et al. (2016) who emphasized the importance of aligning internship experiences with academic pursuits.

Process: Task Relevance, Supervision, and Work Environment

Internship experiences vary significantly. Some students receive assignments relevant to their field of study, such as in engineering, which allows them to gain new practical knowledge. However, others are assigned primarily to administrative tasks.

"I was placed in the engineering department, which matched my major, so I learned a lot. However, some of my friends were more often asked to do archives, so it wasn't a good fit." (R2)

This discrepancy reflects structural challenges within the placement mechanism. Informants placed in relevant work units (e.g., R2 in engineering) reported more meaningful learning benefits, while other informants (e.g., R4 and R5, who primarily handle administrative tasks) felt their contributions were limited. This mismatch generally occurs because placement decisions are driven more by institutional agreements with partner companies, rather than by a match between the student's academic background and the needs of the work unit.

This situation also raises the possibility of narrative bias: students placed in relevant fields tend to provide positive assessments, while those placed in less relevant units are more likely to report frustration and underutilization of skills. Therefore, the effectiveness of internships cannot be judged solely by individual narratives; structural factors within the placement process must also be considered. Better alignment between fields of study, career aspirations, and industry needs can minimize mismatches and enhance the overall benefits of the program.

Supervision is another determining factor. Some students feel they receive intensive guidance from their internship coordinator, while others experience minimal supervision. One internship coordinator said:

"We try to give assignments according to students' abilities, but because of our busy schedules, sometimes we can't provide intensive support." (IK)

These findings support Maertz Jr et al. (2014) findings that weak industrial supervision can reduce the effectiveness of internships. The work environment also plays a significant role: well-received students adapt more quickly to the organizational culture, while those with less support struggle. This is consistent with research by Zopiatis & Constanti (2012), which confirms that organizational culture influences the quality of the internship experience.

Output: Skills, Employability, and Professional Ethos

The most prominent benefit of internships is the development of soft skills. Nearly all students reported increased self-confidence, particularly in communication, teamwork, and presentation skills. Almost all informants stated that their internship experience made them better prepared to face the demands of the working world, including dealing with pressure and solving real problems.

"The most noticeable thing is my increased self-confidence. I used to be shy about speaking in front of people, but now I'm more used to it because I often give presentations." (R1)

However, these benefits were not felt equally by all students. Informants placed in units relevant to their field of study (e.g., R1 and R2) experienced significant improvements in both technical and soft skills. Conversely, students assigned more administrative tasks (e.g., R4 and

R5) reported that the benefits they gained tended to be general, such as discipline and time management, without much improvement in professional skills relevant to their major.

This difference suggests an experiential bias: students with relevant assignments were more likely to emphasize positive aspects, while those not in their field tended to highlight limitations. This reflection is important because it confirms that the effectiveness of internships is determined not only by individual effort but also by the program design and quality of placements. Therefore, a recommendation is the need for closer collaboration between universities and industry partners to ensure job descriptions are more focused and aligned with students' academic backgrounds. Additionally, they feel better prepared to face the demands of professional work, including dealing with pressure and solving real-world problems. The supervisor confirmed:

"Students who participate in internships are usually more mature, more work-ready, and have a better work ethic than those who haven't." (IK)

This finding is consistent with Narayanan et al., (2017), who asserted that internship effectiveness is determined by task relevance, quality of supervision, and institutional support. Meanwhile, Jackson (2016) emphasized that soft skills such as communication and adaptability are now prioritized by employers over purely technical skills.

The principle that can be drawn from this research is that the effectiveness of internships lies in the integration of theory and practice facilitated by universities and industry. Generalizations from these findings indicate that students will gain maximum benefits if: (1) they receive adequate technical training, (2) they are placed in relevant work units, and (3) they receive consistent supervision from both lecturers and industry.

However, there are exceptions. For students placed in irrelevant work units, the benefits gained are more in general skills such as discipline and administration, rather than professional skills. This raises important issues regarding how universities and industry should align expectations.

The theoretical implications of this research reinforce the model of Narayanan et al. (2017) that internship effectiveness is influenced by three main components: tasks, supervision, and institutional support. Practical implications: universities need to strengthen monitoring mechanisms, while industry needs to design job descriptions that align with students' fields of study.

As a recommendation, universities are advised to increase the emphasis on pre-internship technical training, establish more intensive communication with industry, and place students according to their fields of study. Industry needs to improve the quality of supervision by appointing dedicated mentors. Furthermore, regular communication forums between universities, students, and industry could be a solution to improve program feedback and evaluation.

5. Conclusion

Study confirms that internship programs are significantly effective as a bridge between education and industry. However, this effectiveness is largely determined by the synergy between universities, students, and partner industries. The findings indicate that student readiness and institutional support are crucial initial factors in determining a smooth internship process. Pre-internship training that emphasizes work ethics has been shown to help students adapt, but still needs to be supplemented with strengthening technical skills relevant to their field of study.

At the process level, the relevance of assignments and the quality of supervision emerged as key factors. Students who were placed in work units aligned with their field of study and received intensive guidance from industry supervisors experienced a much more meaningful learning experience. Conversely, students who were only assigned to administrative work or received little supervision tended to experience limited benefits. Work environment factors also had a significant impact; positive acceptance from colleagues accelerated students' adaptation to the organizational culture.

From an output perspective, the most prominent benefit was the development of soft skills, including communication, teamwork, adaptability, and increased self-confidence. Furthermore, internships strengthened students' job readiness and fostered a professional ethos, which was recognized by both supervisors and industry supervisors. Thus, internships not only enriched students' practical experience but also strengthened graduates' competitiveness in the job market.

Theoretically, this research supports the framework of Narayanan et al. (2017), which emphasizes the importance of task relevance, quality of supervision, and institutional support in determining internship effectiveness. Practically, this study recommends that universities improve pre-internship technical training and strengthen monitoring, while industry is expected to provide meaningful assignments and ensure consistent supervision. With closer collaboration, internship programs have the potential not only to bridge education and the workplace but also to become a strategic instrument for developing competitive human resources at the national and global levels. This collaboration should be realized through the design of joint job descriptions between universities and industry, the training of industry mentors to provide effective guidance, and regular evaluation forums involving all relevant parties. Such long-term efforts will ensure that internship programs are not merely a curricular requirement but also a platform for ongoing professional learning that is relevant to the needs of the workplace.

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