# Student internship experiences: areas for improvement and student choices of internship practices

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## Abstract

### Purpose

This paper investigates areas for improvement in internship practices from the perspectives of key stakeholders, such as university department leaders, host company leaders, lecturers, work supervisors, graduates, and final year students. Student choices of internship practices are also reported.

### Design/methodology/approach

An exploratory sequential mixed methods approach was implementing that included three focus groups, 15 individual in-depth interviews, and 461 responses to a student survey. In the qualitative phase, deductive thematic analysis was employed to explore areas for improvement in internship practices. In the quantitative phase, descriptive statistical analysis, and two non-parametric tests were used: the Mann-Whitney tests and Kruskal-Wallis tests, followed by pairwise comparisons to identify student choices of internship practices.

### Findings

The corroboration and triangulation of the qualitative and quantitative data sets revealed three distinct areas for improvement in internship practices in Vietnamese universities. These are: internship learning outcomes, internship support, and internship assessment. Findings highlighted the crucial role of industry stakeholders, including work supervisors in the entire process of the internship, as well as the key responsibility of universities in improving student internship experiences.

### Originality/value

Areas for improvement and student choices of internship practices in Vietnamese universities have not been discussed previously. Findings carry practical, policy and theoretical implications for higher education in Vietnam and other countries striving to enhance student internship experiences. Hence, this study contributes to the Vietnamese and international WIL literature with its findings emerging from a complex mixed-methods design. This methodological approach offers enhanced reliability and validity of findings compared to previous research in the field that relied on a single data set.

**Keywords**: internship, work-integrated learning (WIL), graduate employability, higher education, Vietnam, mixed-methods

## Introduction

Internship is an opportunity for students to engage in intensive, work-based practices in a broad range of operations within a company (Crossley *et al.*, 2012). This is an off-campus form of work-integrated learning (WIL) which is referred to curriculum-based strategies and approaches featured by the link between academic theory and workplace practices (Patrick *et*

*al*., 2008). Internship has been implemented globally and has achieved positive outcomes, across many disciplines, due to the considerable advantages that workplace environment provides for promoting student employability (Bowen and Pennaforte, 2017; Smith *et al*., 2019). According to Smith *et al.* (2019), the effectiveness of an internship in enhancing student job readiness largely depends on the quality of workplace experience rather than the internship duration or structure.

In Vietnamese universities, the internship is the only one curriculum-based activity arranged in the last semester of undergraduate courses for final year students to apply knowledge acquired at the university into workplace settings. Previous research (Khuong, 2016) has reported that internship has been unsuccessful in creating meaningful workplace experiences for students. In the preparation stage, students are responsible for securing a place in the industry by themselves (Bilsland and Nagy, 2015). But in host companies, students are often assigned with manual simple tasks such as printing and photocopying, and are automatically received a pass result (Khuong, 2016). It is reported to be one of the reasons students show less interest in involving in work tasks during the internship (L. H. N. Tran and Nguyen, 2018). While some studies (Khuong, 2016; Le, 2014; L. H. N. Tran and Nguyen, 2018) have been carried out confirming the ineffectiveness of the graduation internship in Vietnamese universities, there has been little discussion about solutions to improve student internship experiences.

To address this research gap, this paper explores areas for improvement in internship practices from the perspectives of key stakeholders including university department leaders, host company leaders, lecturers, work supervisors, graduates and final year students, and reports student choices of internship practices. Findings emerged from the data analysis of a mixed-methods study that included 15 in-depth interviews, three focus groups, and 461 responses to a student survey provide an informative and valuable insights into current

internship practices and the perspectives of university and industry stakeholders on solutions to improve student internship experiences. These findings carry both practical and theoretical implications for higher education in Vietnam and other countries where internship is considered as one of the key strategies for enhancing student employability. Furthermore, this study also contributes to the WIL literature, as it employed a complex mixed-methods design to improve the validity and reliability of the findings while the vast majority of studies on this topic have relied on a single data set.

## Literature Review

### *Internship Stakeholders*

Previous research (Patrick *et al*., 2008) identified that collaborations between student, university, and industry played a decisive role in the effectiveness of an internship. Ideally, these three key stakeholders develop and maintain strong and interconnected relationships from which mutual care, support, and benefits can be generated. Fleming *et al.* (2018) further discussed the topic by identifying a recipe for the student-university-industry collaborations, which were built from a combination of factors including learning, vision, reciprocity, expectations, resources, recognition, coordination, reputation, and trust. Of the nine factors, trust, clear expectations, and reciprocity are vital in a range of internship contexts and settings (Fleming *et al*., 2018).

Although developing the cooperation between key internship stakeholders sounds clear in theory, the practical implementations of this model often result in challenges. The most common difficulty reported in the literature is the communication disconnect among student, university, and industry in developing and implementing internships (Khuong, 2016). The reasons lie in the different expectations about how to conduct internships, the shortage of focus, vision, commitment, and resources, as well as logistical and staffing

limitations (Billett, 2015; Swart, 2014). The support from other stakeholders: government, university alumni, professional associations, individual experts, society, and internet communities also contribute to the success of an internship (Siddoo *et al.*, 2018).

### *Internship practices*

This section discusses practices before, during and after an internship, as well as the role of student, university, and industry in the internship.

#### *Before an internship*

The capacity and willingness of host companies are necessary conditions for the availability of places and supervision, as well as the viability of this WIL activity (Jackson *et al.*, 2017). Then, university departments should work closely with work supervisors and support students to achieve readiness (Nevison *et al.*, 2018). This is because unprepared students may negatively impact other students and staff at host companies, and in some cases, place themselves at risk (Patrick *et al*., 2008). Prior to the internship, it is essential to have a learning contract between the work supervisor and student to clarify responsibilities, performance expectations and learning goals (Nevison *et al*., 2018). Logistical effort from university departments and academics also includes timing, scheduling workplace activities, anticipating technical issues; matching the employers' needs to the students' capabilities; and identifying the workplace skills and standards that are required (Abeysekera, 2006; Jackson, 2015).

#### *During an internship*

In this stage, the students' workplace experiences are predominantly influenced by the quality of the supervision (Fleming, 2015). According to Bowen and Pennaforte (2017), supervision is vital at the beginning of an internship when students need to get familiar with workplace

contexts. Work supervisors also need to provide mentoring - a process of giving advice and instructions for students (Tofade, 2010). When mentoring, work supervisors tend to focus on critical thinking and problem-solving through role modelling, guiding, facilitating, prioritising, and questioning because workplace settings feature various circumstances and diverse sociocultural contexts (Myrick and Yonge, 2005). It is important that university and industry share the responsibility in supervising and managing students' workplace learning process (Patrick *et al*., 2008). This is because students are encouraged to integrate academic knowledge into the workplace environment and then make sense and relate these professional practices to the theory when returning to university (Fleming and Haigh, 2018).

*After an internship*

Workplace assessment is much more complex than assessment in classroom settings (Von Treuer *et al.*, 2011). Smith *et al.* (2016) recommended the use of behaviouristic and observational protocols as skills and abilities were reflected through enactment. It is vital that the students' performance and development at the workplace are evaluated in a holistic manner (Bilgin *et al.*, 2017), therefore; diagnostic, formative and summative assessment should be utilised. After an internship, work supervisors are expected to provide effective feedback which reflects the students' performance and development at the workplace in a holistic manner (Peach *et al.*, 2014). And students are required to submit individualised work such as a report, written reflection, project plan or work supervisor report to the faculty (Bilgin *et al*., 2017). Academics play a vital role in finalising the internship outcomes, taking factors influencing the workplace learning such as place of work, time, and resources that the companies allocate for each student into consideration (Bilgin *et al.*, 2017). Reflective skills, therefore, are highly valued by academics because they signal the integration of theory into practice by students (Trede, 2012).

***Internship in Vietnamese universities***

Internship practices have received positive feedback globally (Jackson, 2015; Siddoo *et al*., 2018; Smith *et al*., 2019). In Vietnamese public universities, internship is often implemented to fulfil a compulsory requirement of higher education curricula prescribed by the Ministry of Education and Training, rather than to offer students an opportunity to engage in authentic workplace practices (Ha, 2022). Therefore, this study highlights some areas for improvements in Vietnamese context. A review of existing literature revealed few studies which investigated internship in Vietnamese universities (Khuong, 2016; Le, 2014; L. H. N. Tran and Nguyen, 2018). Previous studies focused on the outcomes and effectiveness of internship in local universities.

In his study, Le (2014) concluded that a six-week TESOL internship for prospective Vietnamese English teachers was unsuccessful, due to the lack of interactive learning for students, the hierarchical relationship between senior teachers and student teachers, and time constraints affecting senior teachers. Similar results were reported in tourism and hospitality training programs (Khuong, 2016; L. H. N. Tran and Nguyen, 2018). From the interviews with key internship stakeholders in three public vocational colleges, one public university and two private universities, Khuong (2016) revealed that the internship was designed without considering industry needs, unprofessionally implemented, and failed to provide students with authentic workplace experiences. L. H. N. Tran and Nguyen (2018) added another barrier which was the limited engagement Vietnamese students in work tasks during the internship. The rationale behind the ineffectiveness of internship in Vietnamese universities probably lies in scholastically driven curriculum (Phan *et al.*, 2016), teacher-centered and exam-oriented education (T. T. Tran, 2013), and the university-industry disconnection (Ha *et al.*, 2021; T. T. Tran, 2014).

The analysis of the findings of previous studies reveals that so far limited attention has been paid to solutions aimed at improving students' internship experiences in Vietnamese universities. This is an increasingly urgent need, at a time when higher education systems around the world are striving to improve job readiness for their graduates (L. H. N. Tran, 2018).

**Methodology**

This article reports findings from a PhD study which applied an exploratory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). As Creswell and Clark (2017) suggested, an exploration commences the mixed methods design when measures are not available, or variables are unknown. In this research, the qualitative phase was conducted first to explore areas for improvement in internship practices from the perspectives of key industry and university stakeholders. The survey helped generalise the findings about student choices of internship practices and validated qualitative findings about areas of improvement (Hesse-Biber, 2010). Analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data sets generated answers to the main research question: How student internship experiences in Vietnamese universities can be improved?", and the two sub questions (1) "What are areas for improvement in practices before, during and after the internship?" and (2) "What are student choices of internship practices?".

*Sample*

This research sampled three training disciplines in three public universities in the north of Vietnam: Engineering in University 1, Agriculture in University 2, and Tourism-Hospitality in University 3. The qualitative phase included 15 in-depth interviews and three focus groups with 30 participants. The quantitative phase consisted of an online survey that yielded 461 student responses. Data were collected from March to November 2017. To minimize risks to

participants, this study fully complied with the national and university's ethical guidelines in research (Ethics Approval No.  E17/005).

*The Qualitative Phase*

Thirty participants were chosen purposively to participate in this phase (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). In each university, 10 university and industry internship stakeholders were selected from three cohorts: (i) management (one university department leader and one host company leader), (ii) teaching (one lecturer and one work supervisor), and (iii) learning (one graduate and five final-year students). *[Table I near here]*

Department leaders were contacted first for permission to conduct the research in their departments. They were also invited to participate in in-depth interviews. Final-year students took part in focus groups (Curedale, 2013), while the other participants were invited to participate in in-depth individual interviews (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). In total, there were three focus groups and 15 individual interviews, which were conducted face to face in approximately one hour, and audio recorded. In the interviews and focus groups, participants shared their experiences and perspectives on the limitations of internship practices and were asked to suggest solutions.

A deductive thematic analysis was used to analyse data (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). In each transcript, text segments mentioning areas for improvement in internship practices were identified and grouped deductively in three stages including before, during and after an internship (as per the first sub-question) (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). Participant names were replaced by codes to maintain confidentiality (Gibbs, 2008).

*The Quantitative Phase*

The questionnaire development stage was prepared and commenced after interview data was analyzed. The structure of the questionnaire was built from themes identified in the

qualitative phase, while questionnaire items and variables were developed from interview quotes and codes (Creswell and Clark, 2017). The survey had two question types: response-choice and Likert-type questions (Sue and Ritter, 2016). Response-choice questions provided options for respondents to select. Likert-type questions required participating students to rate their preferences using the five-point scale (extremely important (5)/ very important (4)/ moderately important (3)/ slightly important (2)/ not at all important (1)) which was assessed as a safe and serviceable options to collect opinion data (Sue and Ritter, 2016).

The questionnaire was then reviewed in consultation with a quantitative expert from the Statistics Consultancy Platform of a university. The Cronbach's alpha for the five-point scale was 0.97, indicating a high level of internal consistency of the data set. Qualtrics software was used to create an online survey. In this study, the three chosen universities are located in different provinces. Moreover, the involvement of a large number of students in this phase made other kinds of survey such as telephone or face-to-face impractical. The online survey was piloted by 10 researchers in the first round, and by 30 tertiary Vietnamese students in the second round to fine-tune the structure, wording, and instructions of the instrument (Sue and Ritter, 2016).

In November 2017, the survey was officially administered and followed three-phase survey administration procedure (Creswell, 2019). The survey link was sent to all potential respondents from first to final (fourth) year who were studying in the three chosen universities. To optimally increase the response rate, first and second follow-up invitations were sent one and two weeks after the initial round (Sue and Ritter, 2016).  The final-year students who joined in the focus groups were excluded from this phase because these students had graduated at the time of administrating the survey.

SPSS Version 25 was used to analyze the quantitative data. Descriptive statistical analysis including frequency distribution and summary statistics was used to describe

demographic information of the respondents and their responses to each survey question (Sue and Ritter, 2016). Inferential analysis was conducted to examine whether differences could be found between two or more groups of respondents (Sue and Ritter, 2016). The non-normal distribution of the data was identified from the test of normality (Allen *et al.*, 2014). The selection of non-parametric tests relied on the characteristics of variables. In detail, the Mann-Whitney (U) test was used when the independent variable had two groups (gender), and the Kruskal-Wallis (H) test was used when the independent variable had more than two groups (field of study and year of study) (Allen *et al.*, 2014). Pairwise comparison was also carried out to judge the preferable order between groups of students (Cribbie and Keselman, 2003).

**Findings**

This section presents findings from 15 in-depth interviews and three focus groups about areas for improvement in practices before, during and after an internship, followed by results from 461 survey responses about student choices of internship practices.

*Qualitative findings*

*Before an internship*

According to participating students, graduates, and work supervisors, internship learning outcomes and the arrangement of internship position were two areas for improvement in the preparation stage.

There was a strong consensus amongst industry participants that internship learning outcomes should be decided in close consultation with host companies and work supervisors. The engineering work supervisor provided an explanation: "I think learning content fixed by lecturers or chosen by students are out of date or mismatch with the industry practices" (W1).

The agriculture work supervisor shared the same point of view: "Many issues need to be investigated from the industry practices … So, if the department requests, we will be happy to instruct students following these topics, difficult but effective and meaningful in practice" (W2).

Although acknowledging the suitability of industry for suggesting internship learning outcomes, university departments still hesitated to change. The head of agriculture department stated: "they [work supervisors] have valuable professional experiences and great knowledge of industry requirements…, but the thesis topics were already decided" (L2). It appears that the internship was also utilised as an opportunity for students to collect data for the graduation thesis. Participating students were not happy with the assigned internship learning outcomes. One of the engineering students expressed his disappointment: "Please assign us with topics [that] close to our speciality. I do not want to come to work like a worker" (S2).

Another area for improvement in the preparation stage was the arrangement of internship position. In Vietnamese universities, students were responsible for securing an internship place and finding work supervisors to work with by themselves (Bilsland and Nagy, 2015). In the interview, the engineering work supervisor revealed that most of the students he supervised in internships connected with him via their personal relations. As the participating hospitality lecturer suggested, students should show their activeness and independence in finding an internship position because "they are final year students; I think this is a skill that they need to practice too" (L3). However, challenges facing students in finding internship positions: "these opportunities were available only when hotels lacked employees, and they recruited interns rather than casual employees to reduce costs" (S14). Students might need support from university departments to be accepted by host companies, as the tourism graduate stated:

… I do not know where to intern. In small companies, their office does not have space
for interns. In big companies, they do not need interns, if you do in such companies, you
just go photocopying, or making tea... I do not want to do tasks like these (G3).

*During an internship*

Interviews with students and work supervisors revealed the need for longer internship
duration and support from university departments during the internship.

It appears that an 8–12-week internship was not enough, as shared by one of
agriculture students: "I want to practice more, rather than listening to the lectures and taking
notes" (S6). Other comments from the students in the focus groups were: "the more time to
work with work supervisors, the more effective internship activity will be" (S8), and "we
need more time at the workplace" (S13). The industry participants highlighted the student
role in utilising learning opportunities at the workplace: "It's the student responsibility
because they can actively control how much time they want to intern at the workplace" (W3).
Meanwhile, the university department leaders denied their responsibility in the internship
structure: "If any initiative/suggestion is made, it should be taken up by the management
levels such as ministerial or governmental levels" (D3).

According to student and industry interviewees, student internship experiences could
also be improved if university departments provided support for students during the
internship. Currently, work supervisors shouldered the main responsibility for the student
performance in the workplace while lecturers' engagement was limited to time constraints
and heavy workloads: "The department and lecturers totally believe and feel secure when
students intern with us" (W2). In the focus group, hospitality and tourism students revealed
the lecturers' actual concern: "lecturers only care how we write the graduation thesis, not the
graduation internship" (S14). According to students and host company leaders, supervision
from university departments during the internship was required to: "…. inspect the conditions

of host companies as safety is important" (S3), and "…support students if any issues arising from the host company" (C1).

*After an internship*

According to students and work supervisors, greater contribution of workplace assessment to the internship result would add more value to student internship experiences.

Feedback from work supervisors were assessed valuable by graduate and student participants, as shared by one agriculture student in the focus group: "For me, work supervisors' assessment is important as it reflects how I work in the workplace, and I know which aspects I need to strengthen" (S7). According to the engineering company leader, workplace assessment reflected student work attitude and performance: "Generally, students who get excellent results in the internship usually secure good job positions" (C1).

In Vietnamese universities, lecturers finalise the internship result which is either pass or fail. Workplace assessment, which was provided for students in the form of a written report, was regarded as a reference: "It is just the administrative requirement …I know one case having a bad assessment from the work supervisor. But he still got a pass" (G3). The engineering work supervisor raised doubt about the contribution of work supervisors' feedback to the student final grade: "I think workplace assessment does not have any impact on the academic result of the students" (W2). In the focus groups, students also expressed the expectation to have their workplace assessment acknowledged by university departments: "Academic scores are important to any students, but workplace feedback is important too" (S6).

In summary, the findings emerging from 15 in-depth interviews and three focus groups highlighted the roles of university and industry in improving student internship experiences. Interviewees suggested the involvement of work supervisors in identifying the

internship learning outcomes, as well as in the assessment of those. The findings also highlighted the need for university departments to provide support for students in the preparation and implementation stages of the internship. These will be further described and validated in the next section.

### *Quantitative Results*

*Demographic information*

The participants in the quantitative phase included 461 students from three Vietnamese public universities. Among them, 61.4% were Engineering students, 23% were Agriculture students and 15.6% were Tourism-Hospitality students. The number of first, second, third, and fourth year students accounted for 22.3%, 23.7 %, 29.5% and 24.5% respectively. In term of gender, 66.4% of students were male, 33.6 were female. ***[Table II near here]***

*Work supervisor involvement in internship*

Table III shows the student responses to the importance of work supervisor participation in three aspects (i) internship learning outcomes, (ii) workplace supervision, and (iii) internship result. ***[Table III near here]***

On a 5 point-scale, the mean values indicate that the participation of work supervisors were assessed *very important* to students throughout their internship lifecycle. Students wanted work supervisors to be involved in deciding internship learning topics ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.91$) the most, followed by finalising internship result ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.91$), and providing workplace supervision ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 0.93$).

Respondents were also asked to provide the expected proportion of the workplace assessment towards the internship result. As shown in Table IV, the mean value at 63.09

shows that from student perspectives, assessment from work supervisors should have a greater influence than that of lecturers on the internship result. ***[Table IV near here]***

In terms of workplace assessment methods, the response rates in Table V show that a written report was preferable to a score. However, the majority of the students (83.3%) expected to receive both methods in their internship result. ***[Table V near here]***

Results of the Kruskal-Wallis (H) tests, Mann-Whitney tests, and pairwise comparison showed that there were significant associations between the students' demographic characteristics and their responses to the work supervisor involvement in internship (Appendix – Tables A1 and A2):

- Engineering and Agriculture students wanted the contribution of workplace assessment to the internship result to be at a much higher level than their Tourism-Hospitality peers ($H = 39.241$, $df = 2$, $N = 461$, $p < .001$).
- Male students valued workplace assessment at a higher level than female students ($U = 18.230$, $df = 1$, $N = 461$, $p < .001$).

*University department support in internship*

Student responses to the importance of departmental support are shown in Table VI. ***[Table VI near here]***

In detail, arranging internship places ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.92$) and addressing issues arising from host companies ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.92$) were top of student requests, followed by identifying internship learning outcomes ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.90$). The lowest rated item was visiting host companies to supervise students ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.01$).

Results from the Kruskal-Wallis (H) tests and pairwise comparison showed the impact of field of study and year of study on student responses to university department support (Appendix – Tables A3 and A4).

- Tourism-Hospitality students expressed less interest than the rest of the students in three types of university department support: identifying internship learning outcomes ($H = 6.164$, $df = 2$, $N = 461$, $p = .046$), visiting host companies to supervise students ($H = 15.336$, $df = 2$, $N = 461$, $p < .001$), and addressing issues arising from host companies ($H = 10.240$, $df = 2$, $N = 461$, $p = .006$).

- Second-year students demanded the following university department support higher than the remaining students: arranging internship places ($H = 9.605$, $df = 3$, $N = 461$, $p = .022$), identifying internship learning outcomes ($H = 9.441$, $df = 3$, $N = 461$, $p = .024$), and visiting host companies to supervise students ($H = 17.391$, $df = 3$, $N = 461$, $p = .001$).

In terms of internship duration, Table VII shows that the most frequent option was 5-8 weeks ($f = 164$), followed by the options of 9-12 weeks ($f = 128$) and 13-16 weeks ($f = 99$).

*[Table VII near here]*

As presented in Table VIII, nearly half of the students wanted to intern 3-4 days a week, while approximately one third of the students expected to come to host companies all weekdays. Meanwhile, the option of 1-2 days received the lowest response rate (22.1%).

*[Table VIII near here]*

Results of the Kruskal-Wallis (H) tests, Mann-Whitney tests, and pairwise comparison showed that there were significant associations between the students' demographic characteristics and their responses to expected internship duration (Appendix – Tables A5 and A6):

- Female students preferred a longer duration than their male peers ($U = 27.812$, $df = 1$, $N = 461$, $p = .002$).

- Engineering respondents preferred shorter internship duration than their Agriculture and Tourism-Hospitality peers ($H = 24.659$, $df = 2$, $N = 461$, $p < .001$).

**Discussion and conclusion**

This paper explored areas for improvement in internship practices from the perspectives of key university and industry stakeholders and reported student choices of internship practices. While the use of a single data set has been a conventional approach in WIL studies, this research employed an exploratory sequential mixed methods design to improve the validity and reliability of the findings.

Results from 15 in-depth interviews and three focus groups stressed the need for actions from universities to integrate work supervisor inputs in identifying internship learning outcomes and the assessment of these outcomes. Confirming the findings of Jackson (2015) and Bilgin *et al*. (2017), results of the qualitative phase highlighted the importance of support provided to students by university departments in the preparatory and implementation stages of the internship. Results also suggested that the internship duration should be increased. Importantly, findings revealed that universities were inclined to shift the responsibility for improving internship practices to ministerial or governmental authorities. This is due to historic top-down governance of universities and industry which impacts on university-industry partnerships, including WIL (Ha *et al*., 2021).

Similar to the findings of Fleming (2015), student survey results reaffirmed the crucial role of work supervisors in the entire process of the internship, from contributing to setting the internship learning outcomes through the assessment of those. One surprising finding of the survey was that the role of work supervisors in shaping the learning outcomes and the final assessment of the internship was even more important than in providing workplace supervision (see Table III). Survey responses did not confirm student aspirations

for longer internship expressed by interviewed participants. In accordance with the findings of Patrick *et al*. (2008) and Nevison *et al*. (2018), survey responses underscored student expectations to receive university department support throughout the internship. In addition, this study also identified that most students required support for securing internship places and addressing issues arising from host companies during the internship.

In summary, the corroboration and triangulation of the qualitative and quantitative data sets revealed three distinct areas for improvement in internship practices in Vietnamese universities: internship learning outcomes, internship support, and internship assessment.

### *Internship learning outcomes*

This research revealed that both students and work supervisors were disappointed with internship learning outcomes. Without internship learning contracts with host companies, students from Vietnamese universities were underemployed during the internship as they were often assigned with simple manual tasks (Khuong, 2016). Although acknowledging this area for improvement, Vietnamese universities hesitated to incorporate industry inputs in identifying internship learning outcomes probably because the higher education system is defined by the teacher-focused, exam-oriented, and theory-driven approach (Phan *et al*., 2016). The findings of this study suggested that outdated internship topics can only be addressed if university departments identify the internship learning outcomes in partnership with host companies and students.

### *Internship support*

Findings clearly highlighted the need for university departments to provide support for students in the preparation and implementation stages of the internship. These reflected difficulties facing students in the internship, and supported finding of Bilsland and Nagy (2015) who confirmed that Vietnamese students contacted and worked alone with work

supervisors in the internship. Up to now, a common perception of Vietnamese academics remains that learning only occurs in the classrooms (L. Tran *et al*., 2014). This is an underlying reason for the university departments' priority over academic issues and learning activities within the campus boundaries.

Survey findings revealed that of the three discipline clusters, the Engineering and Agriculture students needed more support than the Tourism-Hospitality students in identifying internship learning outcomes, visiting host companies to supervise students, and addressing issues arising from host companies. The reason probably stemmed from the focus on technical tasks in Engineering and Agriculture fields, which required close support of students from university departments before and during the internship. Regarding the year of study, second-year students required more departmental support in arranging internship places, identifying internship learning outcomes. They also needed more supervision from lecturers at the host companies than final-year students. Second-year students were increasingly involved in their field of specialisation and expected to have more support from the university departments, in comparison to final-year students who were more independent and confident.

*Internship assessment*

This research emphasised the need for stronger professional collaboration between work supervisors and lecturers, particularly in assessing students' internship learning outcomes. Currently, feedback from work supervisors has been used as a reference for lecturers to mark the students' internship result as a pass or fail. But in the student perspectives, workplace assessment should account for a greater proportion of the students' internship result (see Table IV). This finding confirmed results of Abeysekera (2006) who stated that the power in assessing the student performance at the workplace should be shifted from academics to

employers, and further suggested the need for a structured and well-defined partnership between workplaces and universities in order to deliver effective and meaningful internship experiences for students. For this to happen, further work needs to be conducted in the areas of relevant policy and theory.

Results from the descriptive analysis of the survey responses also indicated that students valued detailed and meaningful feedback from work supervisors, as the vast majority of respondents selected to have both written report and score in their workplace performance result. This finding provided a practical suggestion for developing effective internship assessment methods because the current pass/fail grading system and benchmarks for workplace assessment methods remain controversial (Robinson, 2018) and do not provide effective formative and summative feedback to the students that would enhance their job readiness.

Of the three discipline clusters, Engineering and Agriculture students wanted the contribution of workplace assessment in the total grade of internship to be at a much higher level than their Tourism-Hospitality peers. In technically focused disciplines like Engineering and Agriculture, students' practice at the workplace that was complex could be captured and reflected more effectively by the work supervisors' feedback than the lecturers' assessment. Regarding gender, male students valued the workplace assessment at a higher level than their female peers. Compared to female students, male students were more likely to focus on performance at workplace contexts rather than at classroom settings.

In conclusion, this research identified three areas for improvement: internship learning outcomes, internship support, and internship assessment to enhance student internship experiences in Vietnamese universities. The study has revealed that student experiences have been impacted negatively by the lack of industry input into the design of internship learning outcomes, processes and the final assessment of student competences,

knowledge, and skills through meaningful and measurable feedback. Findings also highlighted the key responsibility of universities in developing and standardising internship policies and procedures in close consultation with key stakeholders such as industry representatives and students, from preparation to assessment stages. A need has been identified to create and validate instruments to assess the conditions of host companies and students' internship learning outcomes. Despite the methodological complexity of this study compared to previous research in the field, the use of self-reporting techniques both in the interviews and survey research may place some limitations on the validity and reliability of the findings. Moreover, the unequal number of Engineering respondents and male respondents in the quantitative phase may skew the interpretation and comparison of the student choices of expected internship practices by field of study and gender. While this study has made a significant contribution to the field, the inclusion of non-public and foreign universities in future research would provide further implications for students and host companies in higher education internships in Vietnam as well as other developing countries in the Asian contexts and beyond.

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