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## Summary

This thesis explores host organizations' facilitation of student internships, aiming to guide host organizations in designing meaningful internships while mitigating common pitfalls. Through a comprehensive analysis combining insights from Social Learning Theory (SLT) and Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) with qualitative data from semi-structured interviews, this study offers actionable recommendations for host organizations seeking to enhance their internship programs. Data was collected from two rounds of semi-structured interviews with MSc students in Organizational Psychology and Leadership at BI Norwegian Business School, providing a rich, in-depth perspective on the current state of student internships within the HR domain.

The thesis is structured into three main sections: a literature review establishing clear definitions and examining the current internship practices; an application of Social Learning Theory and Work-Integrated Learning Theory to the context of student internships; and a detailed discussion of interview findings with existing research and theoretical frameworks. The thesis concludes with a wrap-up of the most influential components of the student's internship experience, and suggestions for host organizations.

By combining theoretical frameworks with empirical findings, the thesis contributes valuable insights and advice for host organizations. It supports students in achieving their educational and professional goals and has practical, policy, and theoretical significance. Further, the insights extend beyond academic discourse to influence higher education and internship practices in Norway and potentially other countries. Additionally, the study underscores the need for further research on WIL over time and in diverse settings and cultures.

## 1.0 Introduction

Internships have become a crucial component of modern higher education, reflecting a significant shift toward practical learning in the Western world. This evolution in educational paradigms is driven by the increasing demand for graduates who are proficient not only in theoretical knowledge but also in applying it within professional settings. As evidenced by data from the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), more than half of American students from each graduating class since 2013 have engaged in internships during their college years, highlighting the rising popularity and demand of these programs (*2023 Internship & Co-Op Report, 2023.*)

The value of internships transcends the acquisition of practical work experience. They are also essential in professional development, offering students a distinct advantage in a complex and competitive job market. High-quality internship programs let students immerse themselves in industry practices and cultures, develop professional networks, and bolster their employability (Smith et al., 2019). While existing literature often highlights the outcomes of internships, particularly in terms of employability and academic performance (Binder et al., 2015; Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Knouse et al., 1999), there remains a gap in understanding the specific elements that define a successful internship from the student's perspective. Recognizing the pivotal role internships play in modern education and the gap in in-depth research on the internship experiences itself; this thesis seeks to dissect these elements that constitute successful internships from the perspectives of students within the HR domain at BI Norwegian Business School. The study applies Social Learning Theory (SLT) and Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) as frameworks to examine how host organizations can design and structure internships to effectively support learning and professional growth, while giving the students a positive experience. Additionally, this thesis can contribute significantly to research on WIL and SLT, by advancing our understanding of how academic learning can be integrated with practical work experience, through analyzing the components of meaningful internships.

To understand how students learn in practice through social mechanisms and the application of theory in practice, this thesis will apply two central learning theories. SLT, conceptualized by Bandura (1977), provides a comprehensive understanding of learning within a social environment, which is a fundamental idea of internships. During internships, students actively engage with their work environment, absorbing professional norms and skills through observation and imitation, shaping their career paths, expectations, and ambitions (Bandura, 1986). Equally, WIL situates internships within an educational strategy, intertwining academic learning with practical workplace experience (Patrick et al., 2008). This approach emphasizes the importance of structured learning experiences that resonate with the students' academic aspirations and career goals. Furthermore, the WIL framework suggest close collaboration between educational institutions and industries to create effective learning experiences with greater outcomes (Patrick et al., 2008). Such collaboration increases the chance that students are academically proficient and practically skilled when concluding their internship, as both the internship program design and the curricula can help prepare the student for the internship and their first job post-graduation.

To dig deeper into the components of a successful internship experience and how host organizations can facilitate for it, the following research questions will drive this study:

1. What are HR internships in Norway's defining features, and how do they meet students' expectations?
2. How can integrating elements from SLT and WIL enhance the design and execution of internship programs, resulting in increased outcomes and a positive experience?
3. What elements do interns consider essential for a successful internship experience, and how can host organizations facilitate them?

Based on these questions, the thesis is guided by a research structure composed of a literature review that discusses existing internship practices, an application of SLT and WIL in the context of internships, and a presentation and discussion of findings from interviews with students against the backdrop of existing research and theoretical frameworks. Finally, the thesis culminates with actionable



suggestions and advice for host organizations to improve their internship programs based on a symbiosis of theoretical knowledge and empirical data.

## **2.0 Literature review**

### ***2.1 Internships***

Because students often have limited work experience, internship programs are increasingly recognized as vital in today's competitive job market. They equip students with essential skills when entering the job market through practical learning in a professional environment. However, there are as many internship program designs as host organizations; therefore, the quality also varies. Pinpointing the critical components of a successful, high-quality student internship program is thus paramount. Such identification and analysis aids host organizations in structuring programs that facilitate excellent internship experiences for students, not only in terms of learning outcomes but also social and environmental factors such as culture and psychological safety.

The value of internships extends beyond mere skill acquisition. They are pivotal in enhancing students' job prospects and are often associated with securing higher starting salaries upon graduation. The practical exposure gained during internships allows students to understand industry demands better and adapt more quickly to professional environments, significantly boosting their employability. Student internships are also related to higher academic results, which further increases the chance of securing a relevant job post-graduation (Ames, 1986; Binder et al., 2015; Gault et al., 2000; Knouse et al., 1999; Patrick et al., 2008).

Although relevant tasks, adequate preparation, and internship structure emerge as significant characteristics of quality internships, mentoring appears as a cornerstone of positive internship experiences with higher learning outcomes (Narayanan et al., 2010). Empirical studies agree that internships incorporating mentoring yield enriched outcomes, including heightened job satisfaction and accelerated career progression post-graduation (Wang et al., 2023; Ames, 1986). Through mentoring, interns receive crucial guidance and support, essential for

navigating professional environments and assimilating vital job-related skills, often for the first time (Gault et al., 2000; Knouse et al., 1999). However, the mentoring quality is significant; a mentor who does not follow up or support the student can lead to lowered learning outcomes and a less positive experience (Narayanan et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2023).

Adding to this understanding, Jennifer K. Clayton and Steve Myran (2013) provide an in-depth look at administrative internships and the role of mentoring in shaping these experiences. Their study, “Content and Context of the Administrative Internship: How Mentoring and Sustained Activities Impact Preparation,” highlights that the quality and authenticity of the internship experience require both the efforts of the educational institution and the expertise of the host organization and the industry to create high-quality outcomes that are successful in bridging the theory-to-practice divide. They found that quality mentoring, characterized by access to quality activities and frequent contact with mentors, significantly enhances the readiness of aspiring leaders for their first administrative job post-graduation. This aligns with the broader literature, underscoring the importance of quality interactions and mentoring throughout the internship (Clayton & Myran, 2013).

Additionally, the quality of the internship program itself is another crucial facet. Evidence suggests that internships with well-defined learning objectives and room for skill enhancement and feedback significantly contribute to positive internship outcomes, such as strengthened self-esteem and job satisfaction (Ames, 1986; Knouse et al., 1999; Taylor, 1988). Furthermore, factors such as alignment with career aspirations, opportunities for skill advancement, and networking possibilities are integral to the structure of successful internships (Gault et al., 2000; Knouse et al., 1999). Essential to internship quality and career relevance is that the student is given relevant tasks. A potential pitfall for the host organization is thus giving the intern easy administrative tasks that do not challenge the intern, or tasks that are irrelevant for their field of study. Regarding interns as potential future employees rather than temporary administrative help can transform how organizations benefit from their internships. By involving interns in complex, real-world issues, host organizations can leverage fresh perspectives that may lead

to innovative solutions, turning internship programs into a valuable investment for future talent acquisition.

### ***2.1.1 Definition of Internship***

There are many varieties of internships, and therefore, several definitions in literature. Taylor (1988) defines internships as structured and career-relevant work experiences obtained before graduation. Conversely, Gault et al. (2000) offers a more expansive definition, considering part-time field experiences across different disciplines and organizational contexts. While Taylor's definition may be narrowly interpreted, potentially overlooking post-graduation internships, Gault et al.'s definition could be excessively inclusive, blurring the line between internships and employment.

A precise definition is instrumental in distinguishing internships from regular employment. For this study, internships are defined as “off-campus Work Integrated Learning (WIL) experiences wherein students apply academic theories within workplace practices” (Patrick et al., 2008). This standardization is necessary for the conceptual clarity required to pinpoint the internship elements. In this study, the internships were, in all cases, two-month full-time engagements. Considerations of monetary compensation and post-internship outcomes are set aside, mainly focusing on the design, substance, and subjective experiences of HR internships.

### ***2.2 Internship Stakeholders***

The efficacy and quality of internships are contingent upon the collaboration among students, universities, and industries (Patrick et al., 2008). Successful collaboration, especially during the internship period, is underpinned by mutual care, support, and benefits, as discussed by Fleming et al. (2018). Trust, clear expectations, and reciprocity are particularly significant across internship environments (Ames, 1986; Narayanan et al., 2010).

Despite the consensus on the importance of stakeholder collaboration, practical implementation often encounters challenges. The literature cites communication breakdowns among students, universities, and host organizations as a common

barrier, leading to deviating expectations and logistical constraints (Khuong, 2016). This disconnect results from different expectations regarding how to best design and conduct student internships, a shortage of focus, vision, commitment, and resources, as well as logistical and staffing limitations (Billett & Billett, 2015; Swart, 2014). The success of internships also depends on support from additional stakeholders such as the government, alums, professional associations, experts, and society at large (Siddoo et al., 2018). However, these will not be discussed further in this thesis.

### ***2.2.1 Internship Practices***

Undergoing an internship involves several phases, each contributing differently but significantly to the student's internship experience. This section examines the essential components in each phase of the internship process that define the success of internships, split into three stages: preparation, engagement, and reflection. Each phase plays a crucial role in shaping students' experiences and learning outcomes. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of these stages and their elements is essential for analysing what constitutes successful internship programs.

#### ***2.2.1.1 Before the internship***

The preparation phase of an internship is a critical period that lays the foundation for the internship experience. The groundwork is laid for aligning academic theory with industry practice during this time. A central element to this alignment is the development of internship learning outcomes that reflect the actual demands and practices of the industry while still being in line with the students' academic prerequisites. Host organizations generally advocate for co-creating these outcomes alongside academic institutions to ensure that the learning content is up-to-date and in sync with real-world requirements (Maertz et al., 2014). This collaborative approach is supported by research that highlights the advantages of integrating academic and workplace learning, suggesting that such partnerships lead to more robust and relevant skill development (Narayanan et al., 2010; Patrick et al., 2008; Taylor, 1988).

Furthermore, the engagement of host organizations in the internship process is crucial. Organizations that arrange internships and recruit students year after year are essential in offering students practical experience and exposure to workplace scenarios (Narayanan et al., 2010). Without such engagement, students may find themselves inadequately prepared to transition from theoretical learning to practical application, resulting in a workforce that is theoretically knowledgeable but practically inexperienced.

Moreover, educational institutions are responsible for not only facilitating these internships but also preparing students adequately for their roles in the workplace. This preparation involves equipping students with the necessary competencies, skills, and confidence to integrate successfully into their host organizations. Failure to do so may result in interns who are unprepared and potentially disruptive to the workflow of their host organizations, hindering rather than enhancing operational processes. Additionally, being underprepared may carry a psychological burden for the intern, such as a sense of inadequacy and falling short of their personal and professional objectives during the internship (Narayanan et al., 2010).

A central part of the pre-internship phase is establishing learning contracts that clearly define the expectations and objectives of all parties involved- students, host organizations, and educational institutions. These contracts serve as a quality stamp and roadmap for the internship experience and help ensure that all stakeholders are aligned with the expectations and goals of the internship. Without such agreements, the risk of misaligned objectives and unmet outcomes is significant, leading to a less effective and meaningful internship experience (Narayanan et al., 2010). In this study, all the participants had such an agreement which were filled out by themselves and host organizations, before being approved by the educational institution.

#### *2.2.2.2 During the internship*

Once the internship begins, the engagement quality between the student and the host organization becomes the focal point. A critical aspect of this engagement is the internship duration, which should be sufficient to allow for meaningful skill

development and involvement in the organization's culture. According to research, short 8-12 weeks internships may not provide interns enough time to fully understand their roles' complexities and make significant contributions to their host organizations. Extending the duration can, in many cases, facilitate a deeper engagement and a more rewarding experience for both the student and the host company (Narayanan et al., 2010).

Mentoring is critical in internships, serving as a role model of professional praxis and a conduit to the prevailing culture within the organization. Mentors are not just overseers of tasks and professional development but are entrusted with the delicate task of socializing interns into the implicit norms of the industry and the workplace. Therefore, they are fulfilling a role that extends beyond mere oversight to become a formative influence on the intern's professional persona (Narayanan et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2023).

The efficacy of mentoring is well-documented in scholarly circles; however, the influence of cultural and organizational variances on this relationship deserves further academic exploration. Research indicates that while high-quality mentoring positively correlates with successful internship experiences, cross-cultural dynamics between mentor and intern may moderate this relationship significantly (Narayanan et al.). Narayanan et al. (2010) asserts that an appreciation for these differences is vital for enhancing mentoring to accommodate the diversity among interns. Culture imprints upon styles of communication, hierarchical interactions, and the essence of relationship development- all of which are integral to the success of mentoring.

In cases of suboptimal mentoring, interns may experience disconnection and an inhibited ability to achieve their full potential. In contrast, a mentor- intern relationship characterized by mutual understanding and support can be transformative, enhancing the intern's confidence and learning outcomes (Narayanan et al., 2010; Schön, 1987). Applying these principles to the structure of internship programs require mentors who are not only skilled in their respective professional fields but are also culturally attuned and organizationally savvy. Such alignment is fundamental to fostering an environment where all interns can thrive and benefit from their internship experiences.

Drawing from Narayanan et al., (2010), the study advocates for developing mentoring training schemes to include culturally responsive and organizationally specific strategies. These schemes aim to establish an inclusive and effective framework that supports the intern's journey from academia to industry. This discourse highlights the need for a deliberate and thoughtful approach to mentoring, focused on recognizing and bridging cultural and organizational divides to optimize the internship experience and outcomes (Narayanan et al., 2010; Schön, 1987).

In structuring internships, the design of assignments and projects plays a critical role. These assignments should align closely with the intern's learning objectives, providing sufficient opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge practically. During an internship, a disconnect between the tasks assigned and the intern's learning goals can lead to engagement in work that is either too simplistic or irrelevant, detracting from the internship's educational value. Conversely, assignments that are well-conceived not only challenge the interns but also allow them to make substantial contributions, significantly boosting their professional development and job satisfaction (Maertz et al., 2014). To ensure that interns are given relevant and meaningful tasks, the formal learning contract should outline specific responsibilities and objectives for the internship.

#### *2.2.2.3 Concluding the internship.*

As the internship draws to a close, it is critical to adhere to both behavioural and observational protocols. These protocols are crucial as they allow for systematically observing and documenting the intern's skill development and behavioural adaptations in actual work environments. This method provides a reliable reflection of the intern's abilities and how effectively they apply these in practical settings. Without consistent and detailed feedback, interns may find themselves unaware of their performance strengths and weaknesses, which can impede their professional growth. A lack of guidance towards the end of the internship can result in persistent errors and hinder their professional development (Narayanan et al., 2010)

Moreover, a well-rounded approach to assessment, incorporating diagnostic, formative, and summative evaluations, is vital for a comprehensive understanding of an intern's progression and abilities. This combination of assessments ensures that the intern's development is accurately monitored throughout the internship. Diagnostic assessments identify initial strengths and weaknesses, formative assessments support ongoing improvement, and summative evaluations measure overall achievements. Unclear assessment criteria can create confusion, making it difficult for interns to recognize their strong points and areas needing improvement. It is crucial for workplace supervisors to deliver consistent and constructive feedback. This feedback cycle is essential as it informs interns about their ongoing progress and areas that need further development, thus preparing them for their transition into their first full-time job post-graduation (Narayanan et al., 2010)

Furthermore, the ability to reflect is highly valued as it demonstrates an intern's capacity to combine theoretical knowledge with practical application. Reflective skills are significant as they indicate an intern's ability to integrate classroom learning with real-world experiences (Schön, 1987). If neglected, interns miss the opportunity to deepen their understanding of how theoretical concepts are operationalized in the workplace, preventing the effective integration of theory and practice.

Lastly, if the outcomes of these assessments are not aligned with the internship's academic goals, the experience's transformative potential may be reduced. A disconnect between the theoretical learning intended by educational programs and the practical skills gained during the internship can hinder interns from effectively transferring these skills into future jobs (Schön, 1987). In this study, all participants were required to complete a report at the end of their internship, where they reflected on their experiences. The host organization also evaluated the intern's performance, including areas of improvement.

### ***2.3 Theoretical Frameworks for a Successful Internship***

Internships represent a unique educational approach that blends the principles of socialization and learning theories. This is important, as students frequently report



that the most beneficial skills acquired during internships relate to socialization and practical learning- key components for professional success (Bandura & Walters, 1977). This section will examine how internships facilitate social and learning experiences through frameworks emphasizing the importance of applying theoretical knowledge in real-world settings.

### *2.3.1 Work Integrated Learning (WIL)*

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) is an educational strategy designed to bridge the gap between classroom-based theoretical education and practical skill application, addressing inadequacies often found in traditional academic settings- scholars like Raymond and McNabb (1993) and Margaryan et al. (2022) argues that universities alone are insufficient for teaching the employability skills necessary for today's job market. Instead, these skills are more effectively developed through real-world experiences where students face authentic challenges. Internships, as a form of WIL, allow students to enhance their “employability capital” by practicing and developing skills directly relevant to the demands of the job market and industry (Taylor, 1988).

WIL integrates academic learning with professional work experiences within a relevant professional context. The aim is to help students develop job-relevant skills and to apply academic knowledge in real-world settings (Fleming et al., 2018). This integration not only responds to graduate employability models (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007) but also addresses persistent challenges in higher education (Coll & Zegwaard, 2006). Research shows that students that have completed internship programs during their studies make significant gains in employability skills such as teamwork, problem-solving, and communication (Crebert et al., 2004), which are crucial for navigating the professional world and are increasingly valued within higher education programs.

However, the impact of WIL on job attainment and career progression is less clear, with inconsistent evidence reported in the literature (Wilton, 2014). It is essential to consider the prevailing labour market conditions when assessing the effects of WIL on employment outcomes (Brown et al., 2004). Nevertheless, participation in WIL has been linked to improved student academic performance,

which may be attributed to increased maturity, motivation, and accountability (Gamble et al., 2010). However, the link between academic performance and internship experience is complex, as it may be influenced by the tendency of more capable students to opt for internships, with the value added to academic achievement varying across disciplines (Bullock et al., 2009).

To implement WIL effectively in internship designs, academic institutions can partner with industry leaders to integrate practical work experiences into the educational curricula, providing students with valuable real-world experience, professional networking opportunities, and enhanced employability upon graduation (Khuong, 2016).

### *2.3.2 Social Learning Theory*

Social Learning Theory (SLT), developed by Albert Bandura, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how learning occurs in social contexts. It is particularly applicable to internships, where learning extends beyond direct instruction to include observation and modelling of behaviours within a professional setting.

Central to SLT is observational learning or modelling, which in short suggests that people can learn new behaviours by watching others (Bandura & Walters, 1977). This process includes four key steps: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. In an internship setting, interns observe their mentors and colleagues, absorbing how tasks are performed, strategies are implemented, and professional interactions are managed. They retain this information, later applying it in their own work tasks, motivated by the positive outcomes they observe.

During internships, role models are central to observational learning. Interns often look to their supervisors and more experienced colleagues as examples of behaving and performing professionally. The influence of these role models is significant, as they provide tangible examples of how to integrate and apply theoretical knowledge in a practical context (Carroll & Bandura, 1982). Interns learn not only the explicit skills necessary for their professional tasks but also the implicit norms and values that are part of the organizational culture.

Vicarious reinforcement, another key concept in SLT, describes how individuals are motivated to copy behaviours by observing the rewards that others receive (Bandura & Walters, 1977). Within an internship, when interns see positive recognition from their peers for successful project completion or innovative problem-solving, they are encouraged to act similarly to obtain the same rewards.

Self-efficacy, or the belief in one's capabilities to achieve a goal, is a critical element of SLT that influences an individual's approach to tasks, persistence in the face of challenges, and resilience to adversity (Bandura & Walters, 1977). Interns with high self-efficacy are more likely to take on challenging tasks, persist when difficulties arise, and ultimately learn more from their internship experience. This belief in own capabilities can be cultivated through mastery experiences, social persuasion, and learning from the successes and failures of others (Bandura & Wessels, 1994).

Internships provide an environment ripe for the application of SLT. Through carefully structured programs, interns can be exposed to role models that demonstrate effective professional behaviours and strategies for success within the organization. The incorporation of reflective practices, feedback sessions, and opportunities for incremental responsibility can further enhance the learning experience, allowing interns to build their skills and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986).

#### ***2.4 Summary***

Social Learning Theory underscores the role of observation, imitation, and social interactions in learning. In the context of internships, this theory suggests that students learn not only through practice but also by observing and imitating others, particularly role models within the host organization. The presence of positive role models and opportunities for observational learning can significantly impact students' behaviours, attitudes, and aspirations during their internship. The intern can significantly enhance outcomes by providing interns with access to skilled professionals, encouraging interaction and observation, and promoting positive reinforcement through recognition and rewards.

Work Integrated Learning theory, on the other hand, focuses on integrating academic learning with practical work experiences. This theory recognizes the importance of bridging the gap between classroom knowledge and real-world application. In the context of internships, WIL theory highlights the significance of meaningful work tasks, practical skills development, and applying academic knowledge in a professional setting. Host organizations can create a successful student internship program that maximizes student learning outcomes by designing programs that align with students' academic curriculum, providing opportunities for hands-on experiences, and facilitating the integration of theory and practice.

Overall, both theories are relevant when researching internships as they emphasize the importance of providing students with opportunities for learning, skill development, and exposure to real-world work environments. By incorporating the principles of SLT and WIL theory into the design and implementation of internship programs, host organizations can create a supportive and enriching experience that enhances students' learning outcomes, career development, and overall satisfaction with the internship program.

### **3.0 Methodology**

#### ***3.1 Research Philosophy and Strategy***

I employed a qualitative research methodology to gain a nuanced understanding of students' expectations, perceptions, and experiences of their internships. This methodological choice aligns with the objectives of exploratory and descriptive research, emphasizing the depth of understanding over breadth (Creswell & Poth, 2016). A qualitative research design usually collects participant data through interviews or observation, whereas the researcher inductively constructs themes. Further, the researcher interprets the collected and analysed data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Employing an inductive approach is described as “the relationship between theory and research in which the former is generated out of the latter” (Bryman, 2019, pp. 356–358).

Rather than testing existing theory through hypotheses, I seek to explore the elements that constitute a successful student internship. Thus, A qualitative approach is preferred, focusing on generating new ideas or insights (Bryman, 2019, pp. 356–358). Furthermore, a phenomenological approach is employed in this study, and several research designs are applicable to qualitative data collection and analyses. As this approach allows an in-depth exploration of the participants' lived experiences and perceptions, it is pivotal in the interview process (Moustakas, 1994). This approach was chosen as it aligns with the study's goal of understanding the subjective essence of students' internship experiences and their conceptualization of an ideal internship structure and environment.

The participants were recruited from my professional network at school and were all master's students from the Leadership and Organizational Psychology program at BI Norwegian Business School. The interviews were primarily conducted digitally, allowing a pragmatic approach, reflecting the current trends in research practices and the accessibility constraints posed by modern schedules (Johannessen, 2021).

Qualitative interviews were chosen as the technique is renowned for its flexibility, enabling participants to express their perspectives richly and without the confines of structured questionnaires (Bryman, 2019, p. 435). This method was instrumental in capturing the nuanced reflections of participants, capturing their experiences and perceptions authentically.

Individual interviews were the preferred mode of data collection to ensure privacy and foster an environment where participants could share openly. This interview form is especially suited when discussing sensitive or personal experiences. Group interviews can lead to participants influencing each other's responses and could make interviewees hold back information relevant to the study (Seidman, 2006). The digital medium of choice for conducting these interviews was Google Meet, which was deemed most suitable given the logistical considerations and the need for a secure and reliable communication platform.

### *3.2 Data Acquisition*

In qualitative research, data is the cornerstone upon which the entire research edifice is built. It is through the collection of rich, descriptive narratives and observations that qualitative researchers seek to understand the complexities of human experiences and social phenomena (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In this study I conducted two rounds of semi-structured interviews with each participant to collect data. The semi-structured interview format is especially suited for qualitative research as it balances the structured questions necessary to address the research objectives and the flexibility required to allow unexpected themes to emerge (Brinkmann, 2013). This approach is beneficial when exploring subjective experiences, such as student internships, where individual perceptions and emotions significantly shape the overall experience. The decision to utilize semi-structured interviews for data collection was driven by a commitment to capturing the multifaceted nature of students' internship experiences while having some flexibility to capture the depth and nuances of the individual student's experience. Before the interviews, an interview guide with questions and topics essential for the research questions was prepared to avoid the interview becoming unstructured, risking not getting the answers I needed. The interview guides were mainly divided into three parts based on selected theoretical constructs for the study. These parts consisted of an introduction, questions about the internship experience, and theoretical constructs, such as tasks, learning environment, mentoring, expectations, and a wrap-up at the end of the interview.

#### *3.2.1 Sample*

The scope of the sample for this research was meticulously selected to explore the multifaceted experiences of master's students from the Leadership and Organizational Psychology program at BI Norwegian Business School, who participated in internships during their third semester. The criterion for inclusion in this study was completion of the internship course, which is a comprehensive part of the master's program. Participation in this course was the only selection criterion for potential interviewees. The study did not impose any conditions regarding the host organizations of these internships, as the school already has a relevant set of criteria related to relevance, length, mentoring, and more that had to be approved before the student commenced the internship. This approach

ensured consistency in essential factors, such as internship length and function, which allowed for a diverse range of experiences to be captured.

Initially, an attempt was made to employ a probability sampling method, ensuring each potential participant within the Leadership and Organizational Psychology graduate class of 2023 had an equal opportunity to be selected for the study. This approach was chosen for its merits in representativeness and minimized sampling errors. An invitation was extended to all eligible students via a digital platform utilized by the class. However, the response was lower than anticipated, with only two volunteers emerging from this method. Consequently, the study's recruitment strategy shifted towards a non-probability sampling approach. Personal outreach was made to approximately 15 classmates, which resulted in 10 willing participants who met the inclusion criteria. Combining these with the first recruitment, the final sample comprised 12 interviewees.

This final sample represented a cross-section of industries and organizational types, including both novices undertaking their first internships and others who brought more substantial experience to their roles. However, all the interns had roles related to HR. The sample's composition was dynamic, with the number of informants and data continually evaluated as the data collection progressed. Interviews ceased once data saturation was reached- when additional interviews ceased to yield new insights (Guest et al., 2006). Demographically, the informants spanned both genders, aged between 23 and 25, which provided a balance and richness to the perspectives gathered. Some participants were engaged in internships aligned with their current employment, while others encountered their host organizations for the first time during their internship. To ensure a robust understanding of the phenomena under study, the same sample of informants participated in both rounds of data collection, thus providing depth and continuity to the analysis.

### *3.2.2 Interview Process*

The initial interviews were conducted in the weeks following the internship period, specifically between weeks 43 and 47 of 2022. Timing the interviews

close to the internships' end was a strategic choice to capture the participants' experiences while still vivid, a practice which enhances the reliability of the data collected. Each interview was continuously transcribed by hand, ensuring no personal details about the participants were collected and avoiding recording the interview. The interviews were conducted in a setting that assured confidentiality, with all participants providing informed consent beforehand. The average duration of each interview was 30 minutes.

The second round of interviews was conducted during the master's thesis period, between weeks 18 and 20 of 2023. Given the students' demanding schedules at this juncture, flexibility in the data collection process was necessary. Consequently, the interviews were conducted through digital meetings and written responses when needed, ensuring full participation from the initial cohort of 12. Digital interviews were transcribed in real-time, with the opportunity for immediate follow-up queries. Participants who opted for written responses were presented with additional questions to probe their initial answers, facilitating a deeper exploration of their written narratives.

As the participants were acquaintances of mine, each interview session began with an informal chat to create a comfortable atmosphere conducive to open communication. This preliminary dialogue helped ease any apprehension associated with a formal interview context. A rapport was fostered by sharing insights from my internship experience, encouraging the interviewees to share more openly. This method aligns with the phenomenological approach, which suggests that the mutual sharing of experiences can create a trustful environment conducive to obtaining genuine narratives (Brinkmann, 2013). However, introducing personal experiences before the formal interview questions could influence the interviewees' responses, possibly leading them to align their accounts with my shared experiences. This aspect of the interview process was carefully considered to minimize potential bias in the data collected.

### *3.2.3 Interview Guides*

The initial guide commenced with broad questions intended to ease participants into the discussion and gather baseline data on their internship experiences. This



aligns with best practices in qualitative interviewing, where establishing rapport and context is crucial for eliciting rich data (Seidman, 2006).

For example, participants were asked:

*“What motivated you to choose this particular internship?” and “Has the internship experience met your expectations? Why/why not?”*

This question sought to explore the alignment of initial expectations with actual experiences, which is crucial in understanding the perceived value and impact of the internship (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007).

*“Reflecting on your internship, can you describe a learning moment that stood out to you, and why?”*

This question in the second interview invited participants to describe specific learning moments, aiming to uncover instances of WIL in action, where the practical application of classroom knowledge could be identified (Patrick et al., 2008).

The follow-up guide delved deeper, focusing on the nuances of the students’ experiences and the research’s theoretical constructs. The questions were formulated to prompt reflection on specific aspects of the internship that could be mapped onto the theoretical frameworks:

*“During your internship, can you describe how the mentoring you received facilitated your learning?”*

This question relates directly to SLT, as it probes into the role of mentors as models for observational learning, a key component of Bandura’s theory (1977).

*“How did the internship affect your overall academic, professional, and personal development?”*

This question is designed to extract insights into the transferability of skills and knowledge from academia to the professional world, a central concern of WIL (Crebert et al., 2004).

The guides' questions were crafted to explore individual narratives and align responses with the study's theoretical framework. The semi-structured format allowed for the emergence of themes organically during interviews, providing a rich tapestry of data from which to conclude (Brinkmann, 2013). The questions were also designed to facilitate an analysis that could bridge the gap between theory and practice, a crucial element in qualitative research that aims to yield actionable insights (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

### ***3.3 Data Evaluation***

#### *3.3.1 Validity*

In academic inquiry, validity and reliability stand as critical benchmarks affirming the integrity of research findings. Validity, particularly within qualitative research, is concerned with the authenticity of the data and the accuracy with which it reflects the investigated phenomena. This project precedes internal validity, focusing on the congruence between empirical observations and the theoretical frameworks guiding the research. The strength of internal validity lies in its capacity to explore the various nuances of individual experiences within the specific context of HR internships (Bryman, 2019, p. 363). External validity, or the broader applicability of the findings, was not a primary concern of this study due to its qualitative nature and the specificity of the context- HR internship experiences. Thus, while the insights gathered may offer profound depth and understanding within the context studied, they are not designed for complete application across disparate scenarios (Bryman, 2019, p. 362).

#### *3.3.2 Reliability*

Reliability in qualitative research eschews the traditional statistical notions of repeatability that characterize quantitative studies, instead adopting the concept of dependability. Dependability is similar to reliability but is understood through consistency over time and circumstances. It involves an audit trail for the

researcher's decisions throughout the research process, ensuring that the study's findings are consistently derived from the data, not random constructs (Bryman, 2019, p. 362).

Given that this study entailed translating interview responses from Norwegian to English, an added layer of scrutiny was essential to maintain dependability. Rigorous measures were employed to mitigate the risk of translational errors that could skew the data's authenticity. In this process we were two interviewers which both actively participated in the interviews and the transcription and translation process, providing a dual check system that enhanced the trustworthiness of the data translation and interpretation process.

### *3.3.3 Ethical Considerations*

Ethical considerations in research are paramount, not only for the protection of participants but also for the study's credibility. All interviewees engaged in this study did so voluntarily, with a comprehensive understanding of the research objectives, the methods of data usage, and their right to withdraw consent at any point. Anonymity and confidentiality were upheld as core principles, with all identifying information being meticulously obscured to prevent any potential breach of privacy. These ethical commitments were not only in adherence to research standards but also reflective of the respect and integrity with which this study was conducted (Bryman, 2019, pp. 110–136).

## **4 Analysis and Findings**

The analysis and findings section will focus on the findings from the data collection, specifically examining what elements shape a successful internship as perceived by students in the MSc program in Organizational Psychology and Leadership at BI Norwegian Business School.

Through the interviews, a consensus emerged among the participants regarding the inherent value of internships. They uniformly agreed that the idea of internships are worthwhile and encouraged their peers to pursue such

opportunities. However, the reasons behind the value they attributed to their internships were diverse. This analysis aims to extract the factors that either enhanced or diminished their experiences, to provide host organizations with actionable insights to improve the design of future internship programs.

A notable variable among the interviewees was the degree of familiarity and prior engagement with their host organizations. One-fourth of the participants had previous interactions with their host organizations, whether through collaboration or part-time employment, influencing their expectations and experiences. Despite this familiarity, their responses regarding various aspects of the internship were as varied as those of participants with no prior experience. Consequently, the analysis will present the findings from both groups in parallel.

#### *4.1 Phenomenological Approach to Data Interpretation*

In line with the phenomenological approach that underpins this research, the data analysis was undertaken with a focus on understanding the essence of the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Following the methodological steps outlined by Colaizzi (Morrow et al., 2015), the analysis began with a thorough reading of the transcripts to gain a fundamental understanding of the participants' accounts. Significant statements capturing their experiences' essence were then extracted and examined to identify underlying themes and patterns.

The phenomenological method emphasizes the importance of the participants' perspectives, focusing on their views and experiences rather than the researcher's interpretations. This was reflected in the study's approach to data analysis, which sought to remain true to the participants' voices and the meanings they ascribed to their experiences.

To ensure the rigor and depth of the analysis, I engaged in an iterative process of examining and re-examining the data, comparing and contrasting different participants' accounts, and searching for convergences and divergences in the data. This process is essential in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive and trustworthy interpretation of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

The Colaizzi (1978) method was particularly appropriate for this study because it emphasizes extracting meaning from qualitative data (Morrow et al., 2015). By following this method, I could distil the participants' experiences into a series of fundamental themes that captured the core of their internship experiences. These themes served as the building blocks for the study's findings, providing insights into what constitutes a meaningful and successful internship experience from the student's perspective.

#### ***4.2 Participants and Motivation***

I conducted an analysis during the initial interview round to map the participants' internships, professional backgrounds, and motivation for enrolling in an internship program. This exercise aimed to uncover the participants' motivations for the internship itself, as well as the motivation for pursuing full-time positions with their respective host organizations post-graduation. Importantly, I sought to discern whether their motivations evolved or changed during their internship experiences.

##### ***4.2.1 Mapping the Participants***

The internship experiences of the 12 participants from BI Norwegian Business School in the 2022 fall semester were as varied as the organizations they served. Eight participants were navigating the complexities of their first internship experience, bringing a fresh perspective and diverse expectations to their roles and host organizations. In contrast, the remaining four, with their history of prior internships, had the advantage of knowledge and experience from earlier engagements. This contrast presents an interesting dynamic as it sets the stage to explore how previous internship experiences influence the expectations and motivations of new interns versus those who have previous experience.

Informant	Conducted internship before MSc	Past experience with internship organization	Motivation related to organization	Function of work
1	No	None	Interested in learning more about the company	HR
2	No	None	Interesting internship program	HR
3	Yes, this is my second time	Part-time employee	Receive greater responsibility than in current role	HR
4	No	None	Interesting internship program	HR
5	No	None	Interested in learning more about the company	HR
6	Yes, this is my second time	Collaboration during bachelor thesis	Interested in learning more about the company	HR
7	Yes, this is my second time	Part-time employee	Friendly and supportive leader	HR
8	Yes, this is my second time	None	Reputation	HR
9	No	None	Reputation	HR
10	No	Part-time employee	Because of great people in the organization	HR
11	No	Part-time employee	Paid internship	HR
12	No	Part-time employee	Paid internship	HR

*Figure 1 Mapping experience and motivation*

Considering the motivation related to the choice of host organization, the most common motivation was learning more about the company, especially among the participants who had no or little experience with the organization prior to their internship. These findings were not surprising but are interesting when considering what makes a host organization spark an interest among the students. Two students mentioned the host organization's reputation as their primary motivation, which indicates that this is not the most important factor when choosing among host organizations. Choosing a familiar host organization with a good reputation might lower the student's sense of uncertainty, increasing the chance of a good internship experience. Because the four part-time employees already knew their host organization through previous work, their motivation were different, emphasizing their peers, extended responsibility, and being paid during their internship.

#### *4.2.2 Mapping of Motivation*

During the first interview round, I also investigated the participants' motivations to pursue full-time positions post-graduation within their host organizations before and after their internships. This analysis was instrumental in understanding the dynamics of interns' perceptions and motivations, which can alter their internship experiences.

I found that four participants experienced a reduction in motivation to pursue a full-time position within their host organizations after completing their internships. In contrast, seven participants reported heightened motivation following their internship experiences. Further, three participants maintained consistent motivation to work for their host organizations, but wanted to explore

different roles or departments within them.

Interest in working for the organization prior to internship	Interest in working for the organization after internship
Yes	None
Not sure	Yes; More interested now than pre-internship
A little	A little
None	Yes, but not in the HR function
Yes	A little
Yes	Yes; more interested now
Yes	Yes, but no longer my first choice
A little	Yes, but not in the HR function
Yes	Yes, but not in that part of the organization
Yes	Yes
Yes	Yes
Yes	Yes

*Figure 2 Motivation for pursuing a full-time position*

These initial insights into the participants’ motivations provide a foundational understanding underpinning my subsequent discussions. Further, the study extends further to encompass the various domains of expectations, learning contracts, mentoring, tasks, and the learning environment. These facets collectively give a picture of the participants’ unique internship experiences and their profound implications, which I present and discuss in the following sections.

### ***4.3 Expectations and Learning Contract***

Expectations and learning contracts are central to an intern’s experience, often setting the stage for the internship’s success or challenges. Interns approach their roles with certain expectations about their host organization- ranging from the nature of their tasks to the quality of mentoring and the overall learning environment. These expectations may arise from both formal learning agreements, which detail the internship’s scope, and informal understandings shaped during the recruitment process or by the organization’s reputation. The psychological contract, though intangible, is just as binding as the written one; a breach in interns’ anticipated experiences- such as failing to provide a promised inclusive and engaging environment- can be profoundly impactful (Ames, 1986; Maertz et al., 2014; Narayanan et al., 2010). This section explores the complexity of interns’ expectations and the realities of learning contracts, which are vital in

understanding the internship trajectory and its outcomes.

#### *4.3.1 Pre-internship Expectations*

To some extent, all the students in the study had expectations to their host organization and the internship as a whole. Generally, the motivation for enrolling an internship program was to gain work experience, regardless of the host organization, being able to apply what they had learned through their studies in practice:

*“I wanted to gain real-life work experience and learn how to apply classroom theory into practice”.*

Other expectations were related to learning, specifically abilities in the HR and consulting field. For the interns who already worked at their host organizations, expectations were related to getting more responsibility and working with new tasks. P3 emphasizes:

*“I expected to get greater responsibility at work, but also to work with new projects and tasks to explore other parts of the organization.”*

Further, three students stated that they wanted to increase their professional network during their internship, illustrated by P7:

*“I wanted to gain work experience, but also to have references and a bigger professional network for the future.”*

#### *4.3.2 Alignment Between Expectations and Experiences*

The initial round of interviews was instrumental in discerning the degree to which interns' expectations converged with their actual internship experiences. Notably, interns with prior associations with the host organization or those already employed there reported a higher level of alignment between their expectations and their internship realities. Approximately two-thirds of these interns expressed



contentment with the extent to which their expectations were met. Participant 7, with previous experience at the host organization, exemplified this:

*“The internship did comply with my expectations, but I knew what I was going into, so I had very realistic expectations.”*

In contrast, a different scenario unfolded for interns who encountered the host organization for the first time during their internships. P1 stated:

*“In some areas, the internship complied with my expectations, and in some areas, it did not. There was too little work, and I was not given the expected tasks. I had a lot of spare time. Further, I worked separately from the rest of the organization.”*

#### ***4.4 Mentoring and Role Models***

Mentoring and role models are, according to the literature, a central part of how the internship experience plays out (Ames, 1986; Maertz et al., 2014; Narayanan et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2023). In this case, the learning agreement between the student and host organizations demands the student have a dedicated mentor/supervisor throughout their internship. However, the make or break is not whether the intern has a mentor but how the mentor follows the intern up through regular meetings, feedback, onboarding, and so on. The rest of the team also plays a crucial role, as they might serve as role models for the intern. Because all the interns in this study had a mentor, I focused on asking the students about the quality of supervision, structure, and how the mentoring contributed to their professional development and internship experience.

##### ***4.4.1 Mentoring and Support***

To examine the interns’ different mentoring experiences, I asked the informants about the general mentoring and support they received during their internship. About two-thirds of the participants were generally happy with the mentoring and support they received during the internship. P4 responded:

*“I had weekly meetings with my supervisor, in which we went through how I was doing, as well as my performance. These were in addition to spontaneous meetings we had when needed. Additionally, the HR leader also followed up and had regular meetings with me. This way, I received regular input from different perspectives contributing to my learning and development. I was really satisfied.”*

Further, the one-third that was generally displeased explained that this was mostly due to the mentor being absent and lack of follow-up. P2 expressed:

*“Not very good. The only guidance I got before the project was a manual and some videos. This was not optimal, but at the same time, it meant that I had the freedom to try myself.”*

From this participant’s response, the mentor was not sufficiently present during the internship. The possible reason for this is a common pitfall for host organizations, whereas the responsibilities linked with internships come on top of their normal day-to-day tasks. In these cases, the student might end up being down prioritized, such as in this case. This student was also pictured something else during the recruitment process, which led to disappointment and unmet expectations.

Comfort in seeking help revealed varying levels of organizational support during the internship. Half the participants felt comfortable asking their supervisor for help, while the other half were unsure, or did not feel comfortable, which signals reluctance to seek support, which might affect the internship experience and learning outcomes. P5 elaborates:

*“I was not afraid to ask for help, but I also did not want to bother my leader if they were very busy. Therefore, I often asked other team members instead.”*

Among the students who felt comfortable asking for help, factors such as the mentor's presence and availability and a safe work environment were important.

*“Very comfortable. Most people want to help, especially in my project, I had to ask for help a lot. My leader gave me names of people I should ask.”*

#### ***4.5 Tasks and Learning Environment***

Tasks and learning environment encompass what the student did during the internship and in what environment they did so. This is an important finding to discuss, as it has essential and concrete implications for host organizations and how they may design the internship to give the interns meaningful tasks. The learning environment differs from mentoring in this section, as this is more about whether the interns felt they could make mistakes.

When asked about their expectations and tasks, four participants stated that they were given administrative and somewhat dull tasks. P9 elaborated:

*“My expectations did not comply with tasks because I worked with just easy, administrative tasks.”*

Four interns felt that the tasks and learning environment complied with their expectations, whereas the rest of the participants thought that the tasks were neither meaningful nor boring. Most participants in the latter category already worked part-time in their host organization. However, one student who worked part-time in their host organization was particularly pleased with their learning environment and tasks:

*“My expectations were exceeded as I got great autonomy and responsibilities. Further, I learned more about the company culture when working full time.”*

##### ***4.5.1 Job Tasks and Responsibilities***

In the second interview round, I investigated more specifically what the interns considered a valuable learning experience by asking them to provide me with

concrete examples. The responses to this question were, understandably enough, unique for each intern. However, two keywords were mentioned among half the respondents: independence and responsibility.

*“I had the responsibility for a task alone. Because of this, I learned about time management, independence, and autonomy.”*

This finding underlines the need to provide the intern with autonomy, as well as relevant and meaningful tasks during their internship for which they can be responsible. Other respondents gave examples of holding presentations and project management as essential and valuable learning experiences. P4 elaborated:

*“I held presentations for the HR leader group. This was kind of scary, but it definitely made me a better presenter.”*

This statement indicates how providing the intern with tasks that are meaningful and relevant to their education and previous experience can enhance learning outcomes.

#### *4.5.2 Integration and Social Acquaintances*

The interns' narratives revealed diverse degrees of social integration within their host organizations, a factor pivotal to their overall experience. Participant 1's enthusiastic comment underscores the positive impact of social acceptance and inclusion, reinforcing the necessity of a supportive environment as a significant contributor to internship success: (Fleming et al., 2018; Narayanan et al., 2010).

*“I felt welcomed and quickly became part of the team,”*

Conversely, Participant 2's experience echoes the challenges of inadequate social integration. This dichotomy underscores the influence of workplace culture on the intern's psychological well-being and professional growth, resonating with Billett's (2009) discussion on the importance of workplace participatory practices:

*“I felt like an outsider”*

#### *4.5.3 Attitude Toward Making Mistakes*

The host organizations' attitudes toward mistakes varied, reflecting the importance of a learning-focused environment. Suppose the intern is afraid to make mistakes. In that case, their self-efficacy might be lowered, potentially leading them to not daring to take on new challenges, which in turn deteriorates their learning. P3 reflects:

*“The company and my mentor had a good attitude towards ensuring a safe environment for making mistakes! Making a mistake was well received, whereas the team helped you fix the mistake and learn from it. Trying and failing is a part of the company's values. They also emphasized that everyone makes mistakes and that it is a great opportunity for growth and learning. I never felt that making a mistake was being held against me.”*

#### *4.5.4 Career Perception and Professional Development*

The internship experience had a definitive impact on career perception and aspirations. Participant 8's realization, “The internship clarified what I want in my career,” speaks to the transformative potential of internships in shaping career trajectories, corroborating Knouse et al.'s (1999) findings on internships as a career clarity tool.

Consistent with the literature, interns reported significant professional and personal development. Participant 9's sentiment, “I've grown so much professionally,” encapsulates the developmental trajectory facilitated by internships, aligning with the employability skills framework proposed by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007).

#### **4.6 Summary**

In synthesizing the interns' experiences with the academic discourse on internships, it is evident that a successful internship is characterized by meaningful integration, constructive feedback, and a learning-oriented

environment. These findings suggest that the most beneficial internships are those in which host organizations and interns actively participate in a reciprocal learning process, marked by clear communication, structured feedback, and genuine opportunities for contribution and growth. The interns' voices reveal the complexity of the internship experience and highlight the need for host organizations to continually refine their programs to foster an environment conducive to learning and professional development.

## **5. Discussion**

### ***5.1 The Integral Role of Internships in Education***

The unanimous endorsement of internships by the participants in this study aligns with the prevailing academic perspective that internships are an essential component of higher education. This universal commendation underscores the practical value that internships add to theoretical learning in an academic setting. As supported by the literature, internships serve as a critical bridge between academic knowledge and real-world application, thereby enhancing the educational experience (Narayanan et al., 2010)

Internships provide students with the opportunity to apply classroom theories in practical settings, which not only consolidates their learning but also allows them to acquire vital skills that are only obtainable through experiential learning. This is evidenced in the study's findings, where participants reported a range of benefits from their internship experiences, including increased professional networks, practical application of learned theories, problem solving skills, and exposure to real-life work environments.

Furthermore, internships facilitate students' socialization into their chosen professions, offering them a glimpse into organizational cultures, expectations, and professional practices. This mirrors the reflections of the study's participants, who valued their internships not only for the practical skills they acquired but also for the professional socialization they experienced. For many, the internship was a

rite of passage that clarified their career paths and solidified their professional identities.

### ***5.2 Enhancing Internship Experiences through Quality Mentoring***

Central to the discussion on the value of internships is the quality of mentoring. Quality mentoring is pivotal in ensuring that internships transcend mere work experience to become transformative learning and professional development. In line with the findings from Clayton and Myran (2013), this study underscores that the support and the sustained, quality activities and follow-ups facilitated by mentors significantly enrich the internship experience. Their research highlights that effective mentoring during internships bridges the gap between theory and practice by providing guidance which enhance the competencies of interns.

In this study, similar themes emerged where participants with effective mentoring reported better alignment between their educational objectives and internship activities. They experienced a more integrative and supportive learning environment, which not only boosted their professional growth but also increased their job satisfaction and career readiness. This reflects Clayton and Myran's observations that mentoring quality significantly impacts the preparation of interns for professional roles, emphasizing the need for mentors to engage actively and thoughtfully with interns (Clayton & Myran, 2013).

### ***5.3 Career Trajectory Insights***

The discussion on motivation among interns concerning their post-graduation career intentions offers intriguing insights into the role of internships in shaping career trajectories. The uniformity in response among participants with prior part-time experience with their host organizations supports literature that emphasizes the significance of clear expectations in internship roles (Ames, 1986; Maertz et al., 2014). These individuals enrolled their internships with a pre-established understanding of the organizational culture and tasks, which likely influenced their consistent career motivations post-internship.

The findings that eight participants changed their opinions about pursuing a career in their host organizations during their internships highlight the dynamic nature of

motivation and expectation management. This shift could be attributed to a lack of comprehensive information before the internship about the organization, the internship role and tasks, or a disconnect between the organization's promises and the internship's execution. Such discrepancies can lead to reconsiderations of career goals as students refine their professional ambitions based on their internship experiences.

The fact that some students determined through their internships what they did not wish to pursue career-wise is particularly telling. It underscores the value of internships as a tool for occupational clarification, aligning with Coco's (2000) study, that internships can serve as an experiential litmus test for students to evaluate their fit within a role or organization. Internships thus function not only as avenues for acquiring practical experience but also as platforms for self-discovery and career alignment. If done right, they can offer a safe environment for students to engage with the professional world, assess their competencies and preferences, and make informed decisions about their future careers.

This evaluative aspect of internships is especially crucial as it can prevent the costly mistake of entering unsuitable full-time roles after graduation. The experiences and insights gained during internships can guide students towards roles and organizations where they are more likely to thrive, enhancing job satisfaction and potentially reducing early-career turnover.

In light of these observations, host organizations must recognize the dual nature of internships as both developmental opportunities and critical career decision points for students. Organizations should strive to provide accurate portrayals of their internship programs and foster transparent communication to manage interns' expectations effectively. By doing so, they can enhance the value of internships for students, supporting them in making strategic and beneficial career choices.

#### ***5.4 Bridging Theory and Practice: Work-Integrated Learning in Action***

The perceived value of internships among the participants in this study was not monolithic. Still, it varied widely, reflecting the multifaceted nature of WIL and its impact on individual learners. While all participants agreed on the inherent



value of internships, the specific reasons behind this perceived value varied significantly. This diversity in perspectives aligns with the principles of Social Learning Theory (SLT) and Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) as outlined by Bandura (1977) and Patrick et al. (2008).

According to SLT, individuals learn not only through direct experience but also through observation and modelling the behaviour of others in social contexts (Bandura & Walters, 1977). Internships provide an immersive environment where students can observe professionals in action, model their behaviour, and internalize professional norms and practices. This aspect of SLT was evident in the study's findings, where some participants valued internships for the opportunity to witness and imitate the work habits and problem-solving approaches of experienced professionals in their field.

On the other hand, WIL, as described by Patrick et al. (2008) emphasizes integrating academic learning with practical application in the workplace. This integration allows students to apply theoretical concepts to real-world tasks, enhancing their understanding and retention of academic knowledge. For some participants in the study, the value of internships stemmed from this practical application of their classroom learning, which enabled them to connect theoretical knowledge with tangible professional skills.

The varied reasons behind internships' value can also be seen through the lens of the psychological contract in WIL. Some students entered their internships expecting to gain specific skills or industry insights, while others expected to build professional networks or exploring potential career paths. When these expectations were met or exceeded, the value of the internship was affirmed, aligning with positive outcomes suggested by WIL theorists.

However, when there was a discrepancy between the students' expectations and the internship experience, it could lead to a perceived breach of the psychological contract, potentially diminishing the value of the internship. This concept is vital in understanding the individual differences in how students perceive the value of their internships. For instance, a student who sought hands-on experience but received limited practical engagement valued their internship less than an intern

who desired observation and networking opportunities and found sufficient chances to connect with professionals.

Furthermore, the benefits of internships, as seen through the lens of SLT and WIL, reinforce the importance of structured and supportive learning environments. When internships provide a setting where students can safely make mistakes, receive feedback, and take on responsibilities, they align with the principles of SLT and WIL, leading to more enriching and valuable learning experiences.

### ***5.5 Unmet Expectations and the Reality of Internships***

The unanimous quest for practical work experience among interns suggests that internships are not just an academic exercise but a bridge to the professional world. This aligns with the theoretical underpinnings of WIL and the reciprocal nature of the learning contract, which suggests that interns' learning is enhanced by real-world application (Fleming et al., 2018; Patrick et al., 2008).

This finding is at the core of research specifically within the WIL domain, whereas the very purpose of WIL is to apply theory into practice (Fleming et al., 2018; Patrick et al., 2008; Siddoo et al., 2018). This finding thus supports the existing literature but raises another question: what makes interns feel like they learn and gain experience, and how can the host organization facilitate this?

The apparent split between students who had previous experience with their host organization and those who did not underscore a key distinction: interns with prior exposure to the host organization had a clearer understanding of its operations and culture, enabling them to formulate realistic expectations. In contrast, those without prior knowledge faced uncertainty and, in some cases, unmet expectations. This discrepancy highlighted the importance of providing comprehensive insights into the host organization and the internship program during the recruitment process or through alternative channels. It is worth noting that organizational challenges or inadequacies during the internship program may have contributed to suboptimal experiences among some interns. This finding resonated with existing research on the pivotal role of clear, realistic expectations

in facilitating successful WIL experiences. As an example, Fleming et al. (2018) found that the most critical factor for successful WIL was clear expectations, which is supported by the responses in this study.

The notion of the psychological contract in internships, where expectations are aligned with reality, is a recurring theme in the current study's findings. The importance of managing expectations is underscored by the diverse experiences reported by the participants, particularly when preconceived notions of the internship were not met, resulting in varying levels of satisfaction and commitment.

Participants who entered their internships with precise and realistic expectations- often due to previous interactions with their host organizations- tended to report a higher satisfaction level, confirming Rousseau's (1995) theory on the psychological contract. These students had formed a mental model of their internship roles and responsibilities, which, when met, reinforced their positive perception of the internship experience. This observation highlights the significance of clear, realistic expectations in shaping a successful internship experience.

Conversely, participants who encountered discrepancies between their expectations and the internship reality felt that the psychological contract was being breached. Such instances led to a reassessment of their career aspirations and, in some cases, diminished the perceived value of the internship. This aligns with findings that the failure of organizations to uphold their promises can lead to a decline in intern motivation and engagement.

The study's findings suggest that effective expectation management is vital. Expectation management can be facilitated by host organizations through comprehensive orientation programs, detailed role descriptions, and consistent communication. Moreover, regular feedback sessions, as reported by participants, were invaluable in maintaining the alignment between expectations and experiences.

### ***5.6 Mentoring, Support and Culture: Foundations for Successful Internships***

Scheduled mentoring and organizational support emerged as critical factors in enhancing the internship experience. Regular, planned meetings between interns and their mentors or supervisors were integral not only for performance feedback but also for discussing well-being and potential adjustments needed during the internship. Such consistent engagement aligns with the literature, which highlights the impact of continuous feedback and support on learning outcomes and overall intern satisfaction (Wang et al., 2023). This consistency also instills a sense of importance and belonging in the interns, ensuring they do not feel like mere bystanders in the organization but rather active, valued participants.

The study's insights underline the profound influence of workplace culture on an intern's psychological well-being and professional growth, supporting Billett's (2009) emphasis on workplace participatory practices. The interns who felt integrated and treated as essential parts of the organization reported higher satisfaction and a better learning experience. Conversely, those regarded as temporary resources often experienced reduced well-being and a less fulfilling internship experience. This distinction underscores host organizations' need to invest adequate time and resources in onboarding and engaging with interns, ensuring a holistic learning experience.

The social environment of the workplace was considered equally, if not more, important than the professional learning environment. The extent to which interns felt socially integrated within their host organizations significantly influenced their retrospective views of the organization and their internship experience. This suggests that the organization's social fabric plays a pivotal role in shaping an intern's perception and overall satisfaction with their internship.

Further, the ability to make and learn from mistakes was highlighted as an indispensable part of the internship experience. A learning environment that embraces mistakes as growth opportunities are vital for fostering a productive internship. Interns who were permitted to make mistakes without fear of repercussion reported not only higher satisfaction with their internship experience but also an increased learning curve. This sentiment resonates with Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory.

Host organizations can facilitate meaningful tasks by providing a structured yet flexible framework that allows interns to take ownership of their work while also ensuring a safety net for learning from errors. Encouraging interns to engage in projects that require critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity can augment their learning experience. Additionally, creating a supportive social environment where interns feel welcomed and integrated can enhance their sense of belonging and motivation to contribute effectively.

## **6.0 Conclusion & Limitations**

### ***6.1 Conclusion***

The investigation into the internships of students from BI Norwegian Business School has elucidated a multifaceted picture of the HR internship experience. This study has emphasized the critical role of host organizations in facilitating a learning environment that bridges academic theory and practical application. The study's findings affirm the significance of integrating elements from SLT and WIL into the design and execution of internships. A supportive workplace culture, the presence of mentoring and role models, authenticity at work, a constructive attitude towards making mistakes, and opportunities for genuine contribution are identified as critical factors that define a successful internship.

Interns' expectations and the alignment of these with their actual experiences play a pivotal role in the perceived value of the internship. When host organizations manage expectations effectively before, during, and after the internship and provide clear, actionable feedback within a supportive environment with regular mentoring, interns report a higher satisfaction level and more significant personal and professional development. Furthermore, the organization's attitude toward learning from mistakes and the inclusion of interns in real projects with substantial responsibility enhances the intern's self-efficacy and professional growth.

The study corroborates existing literature on the benefits of internships in offering practical experience, networking opportunities, and career clarity. It also sheds

light on the transformative potential of internships in fostering professional competencies and confidence necessary for students' transition into the workforce. Through their narratives, the participants have provided valuable insights that can guide the enhancement of internship programs to align more closely with the aspirations and needs of students.

## ***6.2 Limitations***

This study's conclusions are subject to several limitations. Firstly, the sample size, while sufficient for qualitative depth, limits the generalizability of the findings. The participants were sourced from a single academic institution and program, which most likely do not represent the broader diversity of internship experiences in other disciplines or cultural contexts. Further research should consider a larger and more diverse sample of interns to enhance the external validity and generalizability of the results.

Further, the reliance on self-reported data through interviews introduces subjectivity and potential bias. Participants' reflections on their experiences are influenced by their personal perceptions and may not objectively capture the entirety of the internships. Additionally, while rich in capturing lived experiences, participants may have had difficulties recalling specific details accurately as the interviews were conducted a few weeks after the internships concluded. Further research should thus triangulate self-reported data with other data sources, such as observations of feedback from host organizations, to mitigate this limitation and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the internship experience.

Another limitation is that the study was cross-sectional, capturing students' perceptions at two specific points in time after their internships. This approach does not account for how perceptions and experiences might change over time. Longitudinal studies that follow participants before, during, and after their internships could provide deeper insights into the long-term impacts of the internship experiences.

Lastly, the study focused exclusively on the perspectives of the interns, without incorporating the viewpoints or mapping of host organizations and academic institutions. Including these additional perspectives and organizational structures could offer a more holistic understanding of the factors that contribute to successful internships. Future studies should aim to include these stakeholders to develop a more nuanced and comprehensive view of the internship process and elements.

Despite limitations, the study offers valuable implications for designing and managing internship programs. It highlights the importance of clear communication, structured feedback, mentoring, and creating a supportive and empowering learning environment.

## **7. Future Implications and Advice for Host Organizations**

### ***7.1 Educating the Mentors***

Insights from this thesis and existing literature emphasize the importance of quality mentoring. A first suggestion for host organizations that wish to improve their internship program is therefore to invest time in educating the interns' mentors. Such programs should not only focus on matching interns with suitable mentors but also ensure that these mentors are adequately trained to provide guidance corresponding with the best practices in mentoring. This involves regular training and assessment to ensure mentors are equipped to provide the support interns need to successfully navigate their professional and personal development during the internship.

### ***7.2 Clear Communication and Expectation Management***

To avoid discrepancies between the interns' expectations and their actual experiences, it is essential for host organizations to establish clear communication channels from the beginning. This includes providing detailed role descriptions from the recruitment stage, setting realistic goals, and maintaining open lines of

communication throughout the internship. Regular check-ins with mentors, supervisors, and colleagues can help ensure that interns feel supported and that any concerns are quickly addressed.

### ***7.3 Meaningful and Challenging Tasks***

The thesis highlights the importance of assigning meaningful and relevant tasks that align with interns' educational backgrounds and career ambitions. Host organizations should therefore design internship programs that incorporate projects requiring critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity. By entrusting interns with significant responsibilities, organizations can enhance their learning experiences and professional development, while at the same time potentially gain valuable insight.

### ***7.4 Continuous Improvement***

In addition to implementing elements from WIL, SLT and findings from this thesis, host organizations should regularly review and refine their internship programs based on feedback from past interns and mentors. Conducting surveys and focus groups can provide valuable insights into what works well and what needs improvement. By continuously evolving their programs, host organizations can ensure they remain relevant and effective in meeting the needs of both interns and the overall organization.

By adopting these strategies, host organizations can systematically enhance their internship programs, creating a more supportive, engaging, and productive environment for interns. This study's findings provide a roadmap for organizations to not only improve the internship experience but also to harness the full potential of their internship programs for organizational growth and success.

## **8. Literature**

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