Article

Beyond the University: The Importance of Internships to Bridge the Gap for English Majors in Professional Communication

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Abstract

This longitudinal study explores the efficacy of an internship program designed for English majors, with the goal of enhancing students' professional competencies through a seamless integration of academic learning and practical experience. The study aims to strengthen the connections between academia and the business community, thereby improving students' readiness for the competitive job market. By employing a triangulated mixed-methods approach, we collected both quantitative and qualitative data to capture the multifaceted impact of the internship experience from various stakeholder perspectives. The findings indicate that host supervisors expressed overall satisfaction with interns' performance, while qualitative data revealed that interns demonstrated readiness for employment, showcasing strong potential in career-related contexts, especially within Asian markets. However, the feedback also highlighted areas for improvement, such as the need for interns to refine their decision-making skills and adopt a more professional demeanor. The study concludes that the internship program has a profound and transformative impact on students' learning experiences, facilitating the practical application of communication theories and enhancing business efficiencies. These insights provide critical frameworks for future curriculum development, highlighting the transformative potential of experiential learning in bridging the gap between education and professional practice.

1 Introduction

Internships are widely considered valuable opportunities beyond classroom learning that benefit students' academic and career success. Internships provide the first orientation for students to apply academic knowledge to real-world challenging by engaging in relevant workplace activities (To & Lung, 2020).

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Evidence from the interdisciplinary literature on internships demonstrates that participating in internships has positive impacts on job interviews (Baert et al., 2021; Bolli et al., 2021), remaining employed after graduation (Di Meglio et al., 2022), enhances academic achievement (Parker et al., 2016; Starks & Bower, 2021) and career self-confidence (Ocampo et al., 2020) when compared to those without internship experience.

In this highly volatile and competitive 21st century, employers expect higher education to provide work-ready graduates with the requisite professional skills to transform students into young professionals in the workplace seamlessly. Traditional classroom teaching that provides students with theory-based knowledge is proven inadequate (Du-Babcock, 2016). The importance of internships is evident from NACE's (2023) reports, in which the Job Outlook 2019 survey revealed that nearly three-quarters of employers screened candidates by GPA, yet only 37% plan to use GPA screening in the 2023 report. To stay competitive, higher education institutions offer internship programs as an academic component. These programs provide students with the opportunity for hands-on practical experience, thereby increasing their employability upon graduation (Anjum, 2020; Saltikoff, 2017).

Extensive research has examined the many facets of internship programs in different fields. Alpert, Heaney, and Kuhn's (2009) study examined the effect of an undergraduate marketing internship in Australia. Wen (2010) examined the determining factors that likely affected the internship effectiveness of Hong Kong university students. Du-Babcock's (2016) study examined the effects of the internships that bridge Hong Kong students from classroom-based learning to experiential professional learning. In Taiwan, Hou (2018) investigated the effect and gap of college students' internship expectations and perceptions. In the United States, several studies examined internship programs in higher education (e.g., Hora et al., 2020; Silva et al., 2016). Results of these studies have confirmed that internship experience benefits university students for career clarification (Dailey, 2016) and creates a network of contacts (Capek et al., 2017; Hora et al., 2020) in addition to gaining course credits.

In searching for internship opportunities on the Internet, it is evident that most of the internship opportunities are offered to business and management students. This observation highlights a significant gap in the research, as a large volume of research has focused on examining the effects or determining factors of the internship programs offered to business school students (e.g., Rothman & Sisman, 2016), while little research has been conducted to examine the effects of internships on the professional communication field, such as public relations and advertisement. This lack of research underscores the need for further investigation and development of internship programs in the professional communication field. The present study, therefore, aims to address this gap by exposing professional communication-major students to a real-world workplace and reinforcing their application of theoretical and pedagogical knowledge and practical skills. Integrating classroom-learned curricula with the internship is critical to preparing students for educational and career goal achievement and ultimate employability (Getzel et al., 2000; Williams, 2002), particularly for students with a Liberal Arts background.

This paper presents the outcomes of a Hong Kong-based internship program designed in line with the University's mission of transitioning students into professionals. Our study seeks to bridge the gap between classroom learning and industry needs by incorporating hands-on experiential internships across the curriculum. In so doing, we first outline the theoretical foundation of the internship program design. Second, we review relevant literature on the factors influencing the effectiveness of internship programs. Third, we discuss the research methods and instruments to gauge its effectiveness. Finally, we report findings and present recommendations for future internship program designs.

2 Theoretical Base of the Internship Program Design

The underlying theory for designing the internship program is based on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory and Lewin's (1946) five-stage Action Research Spiral model. Kolb's experiential learning stressed that the best way to learn things is by having experiences and making sense of the workplace

operation. The theoretical framework of the present study seeks to connect the action learning model to experiential learning. The cycles of Lewin's action research entail the five-stage spiral model, enabling researchers to self-reflect and learn about problems at the outset to the complete cycle of assessing the outcomes of its operation before starting the second cycle of the action learning process. Next, we describe activities relating to the internship program design.

Reflect

In the reflection stage, the committee identified the background problems underlying the theory's application in the workplace. There is a growing recognition that internships provide students with "hands-on" work experiences, enhancing their professional skills and refining their career focus. The initial problem that geared the internship project was the need for more opportunities to expose students to real-world work experience, which could better equip them for their future careers. Consequently, the internship program design adds realism and raises students' motivation and involvement by incorporating the internships into an undergraduate program curriculum.

Plan

At the planning stage, the focus was on incorporating a business and professional communication course into the 200-hour summer internship program, which would last between 6 to 8 weeks. A committee comprising three faculty members was established to spearhead the design and implementation of the internship program.
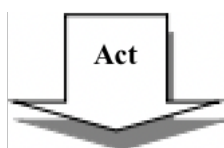
In the subsequent years of operation, the internship program underwent enhancements by incorporating the first-year feedback and adding additional layer of stakeholders, which included academic advisers and an independent industry consultant.

Act

The action stage involved the actual operation of the internship program, encompassing pre-internship training, internship placements, and on-site supervision. The primary activity in the action stage was to monitor the internship process involving interns, host supervisors, and academic supervisors. An independent industry consultant was hired to enhance the industry-academia connection and to provide impartial evaluation and feedback on the project's overall operation. Moreover, the consultant served as a mentor and facilitator, conducting training workshops to foster the practical industry-specific skills development of the students. In the midpoint of the internship period, the consultant held performance appraisals of interns in conjunction with host supervisors, addressing any arising concerns.

From the interns' perspective, the action stage involved assessing their performance to determine whether they had completed all the tasks assigned by the host supervisors and met their academic requirements. This included maintaining a communication log, submitting bi-weekly progress reports, and preparing a final work report.
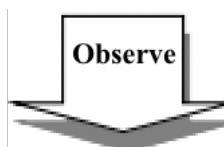
Observe

The observation stage measured the effectiveness of the internship program using multiple evaluation procedures from differing perspectives and at various times throughout the project. The evaluation aimed at uncovering both general and specific problems and providing recommendations for improvement. We used various mechanisms to evaluate the success of the internship program and student learning process, including students' reports, evaluations from host supervisors and consulting reports.
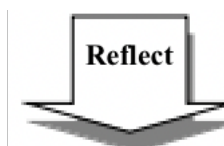
Reflect

After completing their internships, interns engaged in a critical reflection stage, where they reflected critically on their successes, failures, and areas for improvement. This involved submitting final-work reflection reports, participating in debriefings (see, Du-Babcock & Babcock, 2000) and public forums. Additionally,

each intern had a one-on-one debriefing with the independent consultant at the end of the internship. Public forums and focus group discussions were also held to allow interns to share their internship experiences with their peers. This reflection stage led to collaborative revisions of the internship program by the committee members and the independent consultant jointly revised, marking the second cycle of the internship program.

The design of the internship program aligns with Lewin's five-stage Action Research Spiral model. The pre-internship period corresponds to stages 1 and 2, involving reflection and planning. The internship period aligns with stage 3, which involves taking action. The internship period itself aligns with stage 3. The post-internship aligns with the stages of observation and reflection on the execution of the internship program.

3 Literature Review

The body of literature on internships is expanding rapidly, encompassing a wide range of research across different countries, disciplines, and professions. The present study examines the effect of an internship program to determine its effectiveness from various stakeholders. To establish a comprehensive framework, we first review the studies examining the link between academic performance and career development and the mechanism to assess its effectiveness. We also review the significance of student preparedness and employer readiness in the context of internships.

3.1 Internship as a resource for academic and employment integration

In today's highly competitive business landscape, the expectations of employers extend beyond a mere college degree, encompassing the practical application of academic knowledge within a real-world workplace setting (Reardon et al., 1998). Consequently, academic excellence alone is insufficient. To enhance graduates' employability and competitiveness in the job market, internships or service learning projects have become essential ingredients in the undergraduate curriculum. Curricular-based internship programs allow students to attest to their career interests, solidify their professional objectives, and enhance their employability (e.g., Bawica, 2021). In recognizing that fresh graduates usually lack real-world working experience, employers consider internship experience crucial when recruiting graduates for entry-level employment (NACE, 2023 job outlook report; Reardon et al., 1998). Many organizations use internship participation to identify, train, and develop potential full-time employees (Du-Babcock, 2016). Previous research has demonstrated the significance of work-based experiential learning opportunities (e.g., internships), in enabling university students to apply theoretical knowledge, competencies, and practical skills in authentic work environment (e.g., Verney et al., 2009).

3.2 Mechanisms set to measure effectiveness systematically

Integrating internships into the undergraduate curriculum has been extensively reported in the literature, yet "little research was devoted to measuring its effectiveness systematically" (Du-Babcock, 2016, p. 185). Establishing a comprehensive 360-degree evaluation mechanism is critical for examining the effects of the internship program on students, business communities, and universities. Verney, Holoviak, and Winter (2009) demonstrated the significance of well-designed and managed internship program in enhancing students' employability and validating academic curricula in real-world organizational setting. Their study revealed the importance of the tri-party assessments involving the student intern, the host organization, and the university.

Furthermore, the National Survey of College Internships (NSCI) conducted in 2021 highlighted the critical role of mechanisms to evaluate the quality of supervision and mentoring in ensuring successful internships. The survey revealed that students rated their supervisors' support for their well-being ($\bar{x}$=4.2 on a 5-point Likert scale) more highly than task-specific mentoring ($\bar{x}$=3.45). The result underscores the necessity for academic units to collaborate with the business community and incorporate input from all stakeholders to ensure the effectiveness of internship programs.

3.3 Readiness of interns and expectation gaps toward internships

Past research has revealed a significant perception gap that college students think they are well-prepared with the skills and qualities needed for careers, but employers are dubious (Jaschik, 2015). Wen's (2010) findings indicated that the interns' readiness, including self-initiative, academic preparedness, and positive attitude, contribute to the success of the internship.

While well-managed internships are a 'win-win-win' triangular partnership among institutions, students, and industries, it is crucial to acknowledge that unsuccessful internship experiences can discourage or deter interns from pursuing careers in their chosen industry (Hou, 2018). Therefore, understanding and addressing the potential expectation gap of interns is paramount. Hou's findings suggest that stakeholders should strive to gain a better understanding of the factors influencing students' expectations. This empathetic approach can facilitate the development of more appropriate internship program, preempting potential gap, and fostering positive internship experience for all parties involved.

Based on the reviewed literature, the purpose of this paper is twofold. First, it explores what constitutes an effective internship program design. Second, it analyzes the mechanism set to measure the effectiveness of the internship. To guide this exploration, three research questions (RQs) are formulated:

> RQ1: How do host supervisors perceive interns' performance in professionalism, interpersonal communication skills, and English communication ability, and which elements better predict interns' career success?
>
> RQ2: How do interns perceive the effectiveness of internships and their impact on their future career paths?
>
> RQ3: To what extent do internships facilitate the transformation of interns from students to young professionals?

4 Research Method

This section outlines the methodology and procedures for data collection. This longitudinal study examines the evolvement and effectiveness of an undergraduate internship program in the professional communication field (public relations, advertising) at a Hong Kong tertiary institution over a three-year period. Quantitative and qualitative data collection methods allowed researchers to investigate and explore the essence and nuances through detailed, in-depth triangulation of the data collection approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Next, we describe the research participants and the quality assurance mechanism used to collect quantitative and qualitative data.

4.1 Participants

In this longitudinal research, a total of 85 student interns participated over a three-year period, with 10 to 15 host supervisors joining annually. Additionally, three academic advisors, and an industry consultant were involved in the study. The participating host organizations encompassed local, regional, and international companies, including public relations agencies, health/skincare providers, business

associations, and not-for-profit organizations. However, due to confidentiality agreements, the specific names of the industry participants cannot be disclosed. The student interns were sophomores who applied for internship positions and successfully completed the job interviews with the hosts.

The research method employed in this study aligns with the principles of purposive (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and convenience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) sampling. This research method is commonly adopted for studying organizational phenomena in highly competitive environment such as Hong Kong. The sampling approach was purposeful, as the involved host organizations were intentionally selected to align with the nature of the study. Moreover, participants were purposefully selected and invited to participate in the research. Over the years, the number of host organizations increased, while ten of the initial participating host organizations were retained in subsequent rounds.

4.2 Quality assurance mechanism and data collection

The quality assurance mechanism of the internship program was established by incorporating a 360-degree evaluation procedure to measure interns' learning from the perspectives of the three parties, including host supervisors' performance appraisals, interns' self-reflection reports, and industry consultant's reports. Instruments designed to assess the effectiveness of the internship program are quantitative and qualitative. The evaluation process involved quantitative and qualitative instruments to effectively assess the program's impact.

4.2.1 Quantitative instruments and data collection

Quantitative data was collected through two primary instruments: The Host Organization Evaluation (HOE) questionnaire and The Host Feedback of Internship Program. The HOE questionnaire comprised two sections. Section 1 contained a 27-item, 5-point Likert Scale questionnaire that measures student interns' performance from the host supervisor's perspective. It measures the student interns' professionalism, interpersonal skills, and writing/ communication/ production abilities. Section 2 contained six open-ended questions to gather qualitative data.

The Host Feedback of Internship Program questionnaire consisted of eight statements, evaluating the preparedness of interns to transition from academic learning to professional workplaces. These eight statements are as follows:

1. Overall competency in the workplace.
2. Potential to succeed in a career similar to an internship.
3. Business efficiency by applying communication theories.
4. Adaptability from the classroom to an authentic workplace.
5. Ability to perform in the Hong Kong business context and culture.
6. Ability to solve and handle real-world business communication challenges.
7. Performance compared with real-world business communication professionals.
8. Possibility of hiring an intern again after graduation if suitable positions arise.

4.2.2 Qualitative instruments and data collection

Qualitative data collection allows researchers to obtain comprehensive insights from multiple sources and to make sense of or interpret phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) as manifested through the perspectives of interns, host supervisors, and industry consultants. The qualitative data came from four sources.

The first qualitative data comprises the remarks of host supervisors on interns' performance, complemented by the interns' corresponding responses. The corpus of this data set contains 15,000 words. The host supervisors' evaluations accentuate the interns' proficiency in delivering the necessary production skills at a professional level and their potential to succeed in a career similar to an internship. Additionally, the host supervisors delineate the strengths and areas necessitating improvement for the interns, along with guidance on how to achieve progress. Subsequent to the receipt of the host supervisors' appraisal, interns were required to write a 500-word essay to respond to the host supervisors' comments.

The qualitative aspect of the Host Feedback on Internship Program questionnaire was the second data set specifically designed and conducted by an independent consultant. This qualitative questionnaire aims to understand better the internship program by eliciting feedback and assessments from host supervisors. The second set of qualitative data comprised 14,500 words and focused on identifying potential performance gaps between interns and communication professionals within their respective organization, particularly in the areas of professionalism, interpersonal skills, and English written/oral abilities. Additionally, host supervisors were asked to provide suggestions for bridging these identified gaps, thereby facilitating interns' transition into world-class business communication professionals in the future?

The third data set came from student interns' self-reflection reports, consisting of weekly, bi-weekly, and final work reports. These self-reflection reports served as a means for interns to document and reflect on their accomplishments vis-à-vis the set objectives. Notably, the final-work report required interns to act as consultants to the clients, providing recommendations for improving the host organizations and enhancing business effectiveness. The corpus of interns' reflections in these reports contained approximately 130,000 words. Bi-weekly reports were subject to review by host supervisors. By the end of the internship, interns also must submit a final report to host supervisors and obtain comments from the host supervisor. The evaluation was based on the satisfaction level of assigned work and the related performance of the interns. Host supervisors' feedback and assessment of interns' performance accounted for 35% of the internship grades.

The fourth data set came from independent industry consultant reports, which assessed the effectiveness of the internship program and recommended ways to improve it before transitioning from a voluntary-based to a mandatory credit-bearing internship program. This paper aims to evaluate interns' overall performance and the effectiveness of the internship program from the perspectives of host supervisors and independent consultants. Therefore, interns' final reports will only be referred where relevant.

5 Findings and Interpretation

In this section, we describe findings for the three research questions that focus on the effectiveness of the internship program.

5.1 Research Question 1: How do host supervisors perceive interns' performance in professionalism, interpersonal communication skills, and English communication ability, and which elements better predict interns' career success?

To answer RQ1, we examined how host supervisors evaluate the overall performance of the student interns. The mean scores of the 27 items were calculated and compared. The Pearson Correlation Coefficients were also conducted to explore the interactive relationships of the professionalism, interpersonal skills, and the communication ability.

Our findings, as presented in Table 1 (See Appendix 1), revealed that interns received high mean scores on items related to meeting deadlines, following instructions, and demonstrating a good work attitude. However, areas requiring improvement were also highlighted, such as interns' hesitance in decision-making and their lack of initiative in contributing effectively during meetings. These findings underscore the need for interventions to foster crucial professional skills.

As for interpersonal skills, while interns were well-liked and respected by co-workers and clients, they were found to struggle in dealing professionally with co-workers and clients and presenting themselves in a confident manner. Additionally, the host supervisors rated interns' communication ability relatively lower than the other two skills. The interns' ability to use appropriate words (e.g., professional genres) to express ideas was particularly noted as an area for improvement.

The Pearson Correlation Coefficients were also performed to measure the relationships among professionalism, interpersonal skills, and communication ability. The results of the correlations are reported in the following discussion.

5.0.1 Professionalism

According to the Pearson correlation test, meeting deadline is critical to professionalism. The results show that interns' ability to meet deadlines and work under pressure correlates with many other important aspects of professionalism at .01 significance level. For example, host supervisors who felt interns could meet deadlines had good time management skills ($r = .731^{**}$), coped well under pressures ($r = .707^{**}$), were likely to accept direction from their line managers ($r = .626^{**}$), follow job instructions (mean = 4.12; $r = .691^{**}$), and better understand job responsibilities ($= .652^{**}$). More importantly, host supervisors considered these interns reliable ($r = .64^{**}$) and punctual ($r = .560^{**}$).

5.0.2 Interpersonal skills

In terms of interpersonal skills, host supervisors found that interns with a confident manner could communicate well with others ($r = .530^{**}$) and maintain professional relationships with co-workers and clients ($r = .697^{**}$). Additionally, interns who were well-liked and respected by co-workers and clients displayed positive attributes to professionalism. For example, interns exhibited a good work attitude ($r = .432^{**}$), understood the organization's mission and goals ($r = .484^{**}$), and understood their job responsibilities ($r = .451^{**}$). Moreover, they demonstrated the ability to work under pressure ($r = .526^{**}$), produce quality work ($r = .445^{**}$), and actively contribute to meetings ($r = .454^{**}$). Besides those above, interns who received positive feedback from their co-workers and clients were also perceived as proficient in dealing with them professionally ($r = .624^{**}$) and communicating effectively with others ($r = .693^{**}$).

5.1.3 Written and oral communication ability

Regarding the interns' communication ability, the overall ratings are below four on a 5-point Likert Scale, which was lower than the ratings on professionalism. Host supervisors emphasized the interns' ability to use an appropriate tone and style for the intended audience. The host supervisors felt interns who could use an appropriate tone and style had high grammatical accuracy ($r = .564^{**}$) and were adept at using different words ($r = .534^{**}$). Moreover, interns who could link ideas coherently in sentences and paragraphs produced high-quality work ($r = .665^{**}$). Interns' oral and written communication abilities are associated with different professional qualities, such as contributing to the meetings ($r = .617^{**}$). The results indicate that communication skills impact both productivity and work quality.

Overall, interns with a confident manner could express ideas better ($r = .444^{*}$), use an appropriate tone and style for the intended audience ($r = .372^{*}$), achieve better sentence and paragraph coherence ($r = .599^{**}$), and have better and consistent organization of the content ($r = .522^{**}$).

5.2 Research Question 2: How do interns perceive the effectiveness of internships and their impact on their future career paths?

Two sets of qualitative data were analyzed thematically to understand how interns perceived the effectiveness of the internship program and its influence on their future career paths. Following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), we applied a systematic coding method. Aligning with RQ2, we categorized the codes into three overarching areas: interns' professional experiences, interpersonal communication, and (English) communication abilities. The process involved pre-coding, organizing the codes into broader categories, identifying themes and concepts, and providing comprehensive descriptions for the identified categories (Saldaña, 2021). We generated descriptive summaries based on the topics. To ensure the reliability of the analysis, the principal investigator of the present research conducted the coding to ensure there was no interrater reliability issue.

Next, we summarize the qualitative analysis using the four identified coding themes. The data came from interns' responses to the host supervisors' appraisals and interns' final work reports.

5.2.1 Professionalism

Host supervisors rated high on 16 of 27 items related to professionalism, indicating that interns could cope with stress, work under tight deadlines, and demonstrate an excellent working attitude. However, two items of self-reflection by interns stood out: Being well-groomed and making decisions when needed.

Several interns were surprised to receive low marks (3 out of 5) on the well-groomed item. This discrepancy reflects a perception gap of professionalism. One intern reflected, "I assume one's ability and impression should not be judged by appearance. Now, I realize the importance of business attire in projecting a competent professional look. I learned that this is a key factor that cannot be neglected once I work in the corporate environment. The professional outfit in the business world is important. I understand the reason behind it- at first glance, supervisors and colleagues may be inclined to judge by my outfit as they are unfamiliar with my working ability."

The ability to make decisions when needed is another area of concern. Among the 27 items, this item is among the few that received a low mean score ($\bar{x}=3.50$ vs. $\bar{x}=3.98$). 80% of interns admitted in their self- reflection reports that they still carried the mentality of being students rather than professionals working for organizations. Due to this mentality, interns felt they should follow line managers' decisions rather than make their own decisions. One intern reflected, "I found it awful to bring problems to the manager without a solution. Sometimes, when encountering a problem, I directly went to the supervisor for her decision instead of preparing several choices first." This mentality reveals collective cultural influences (Hofstede, 1991). Asians, including Hong Kongers, fall under a high-power collectivist cultural society; therefore, employees or subordinates rely on their superiors to tell them what to do. This may explain the high mean scores of following instructions and accepting directions from the line manager.

5.2.2 Interpersonal skills

In the context of interns reflection on their lack of confidence in dealing with co-workers and clients in a professional manner, one intern shared, "I had to communicate with potential clients professionally and confidently, even when I felt annoyed due to being scolded by the clients for no reason." The intern continued, "I am responsible for maintaining the company's good image by not saying negative words even though the clients' behaviors were nonsense." Another intern acknowledged the need to expand interactions beyond their immediate team, by stating, "Although I handled my relationship with colleagues very well, my supervisor suggested I mingle more with colleagues outside my

Communication and Marketing team." Another intern recognized his weakness in interpersonal skills. He reflected, "I was passive when asking questions. When I was assigned to work on a task, I just buried myself in the task at my workstation and seldom asked for help. I reckoned this is undesirable as it may slow the project's progress. As a communication professional, I should learn to communicate well with different kinds of people, whether they are my acquaintances or not." Taken together, as communication professionals, interns emphasized the importance of effective communication with diverse individuals, whether familiar or not.

5.2.3 Communication ability

Of the three major categories, interns' reflection aligns with host supervisors' quantitative rating, as communication ability received the lowest mean score ($\bar{x}$=3.82). Nevertheless, over 50% of the host supervisors considered interns' communication ability to be fair, and a handful of the supervisors noted that some interns' communication ability had reached the professional level. The reflections made by interns demonstrate their communication ability. One intern reflected, "I was responsible for writing articles for business magazines (e.g., Capital Entrepreneur, Harbor Business Forum) and crafting speech scripts for celebrities. The publication of the magazine articles proved my writing and communication ability." The intern further commented, "I am flattered that my host supervisor believes my production skills have reached a professional level, as two of my article for CAPITAL Entrepreneur Magazine were featured in the July and September issues under my supervisor's name. As a result, my supervisor hired me as a part-time copywriter. These instances indicate that my professional manners in language and production skills have been recognized."

5.2.4 Effects of Internship Program

Through self-reflection, interns unanimously expressed the belief that the internship program had a significant and positive impact on their future career paths. What benefits does internship bring to interns? This paper examines the perceived benefits of internships and the ways in which they contribute to the personal and professional growth of participants. Interns reported that the internship experience enhanced their focus on learning and provided clarity regarding their future career paths. One intern noted the transformative effect of the internship, stating, "I initially had doubts about pursuing a career as a financial planner after graduation . . ., but the internship gradually changed my perspective. After a taste of being a financial planner, I discovered my passion for the industry and made a firm commitment to acquiring the necessary professional knowledge related to this industry." Another intern highlighted the role of the internship in clarifying their career aspirations, stating, "Participating in public engagement activities during the internship exposed me to event planning, which I now believe aligns with my personality and strengths." Furthermore, the internship was perceived as a valuable opportunity for participants to 'test drive' whether their dream job fits. It allowed interns to gain insight into their strengths and weaknesses and provided a platform for self-improvement. One intern acknowledged the developmental aspect of the internship, expressing, "Indeed, I doubt my ability and potential to succeed in a marketing or advertising career after graduation. I realized that my personality and the skills required are still premature for the job. In the coming year, I am determined to polish and improve myself to be armed for a career in advertising and marketing." In all, the experiences shared by interns highlight the valuable role of internships in shaping career aspirations and fostering personal and professional growth.

5.3 Research Question 3: To what extent do internships facilitate the transformation of interns from students to young professionals?

Research Question 3 examines the extent to which internships contribute to the professional development of students, enabling their transition into young professionals. To assess this transformation, an

external industry consultant was employed during the second and third years of the internship program. The consultant conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the program's effectiveness and provided recommendations for enhancement. The consultant conducted a holistic and impartial assessment of the internship program and critically evaluated the job performance of the student interns. Additionally, the consultant played a pivotal role in mentoring the interns, assisting them in identifying career objectives and assessing students' overall market competitiveness through individual counseling sessions and mentorship meetings. Furthermore, the consultant liaised with host supervisors, gauging the interns' market competitiveness through discussions and interviews. At the end of the annual internship program, the consultant compiled a detailed report for the internship committee. This report outlined the program's performance, assessing the overall running and recommending ways of enhancing the internship program's effectiveness and the interns' competitiveness in their future careers.

Next, we present the findings. Table 2 (see Appendix 2) showcases eight statements that gauge the interns' readiness and the internship program's effectiveness in preparing them for the professional world. Notably, the top three mean scorers as rated by the host supervisors are Statements 1, 2, and 5. Statement 1, which evaluates interns' overall competency in the workplace, achieved the highest mean score ($\bar{x}$=3.59). Following closely, Statement 2 obtained the second-highest mean score ($\bar{x}$=3.46), while Statement 5 achieved a mean score of 3.44. These results affirm the preparedness of our interns for employment, their potential to excel in a career similar to the internship and can adapt well to the Hong Kong business context and culture.

Among the eight Statements, Statement 7 received the lowest mean score ($\bar{x}$=3.05), indicating a scope for improvement. This finding suggests a performance gap between interns and real-world business communication professionals. This observation aligns with existing literature, where employers often express concerns regarding the preparedness of recent college graduates and interns in applying knowledge and skills in real-world settings, critical thinking, and written and oral communication skills (Jaschik, January 20, 2015).

 Furthermore, when host supervisors were asked whether it is possible to hire the intern(s) again after graduation if suitable positions arise (Statement 8), responses were generally positive, except for host organizations categorized as small and medium-sized enterprises, which cited limitations in their hiring policy.

The analysis of the quantitative data indicated that although the host supervisors were satisfied with the performance of student interns, they also emphasized the importance of interns being proactive, engaging with colleagues, and demonstrating the ability to work independently.

Moving on to the qualitative analysis, we assessed whether the internship program accomplished its objectives. The analysis, based on four sources, evaluated the success of the internship program. These sources included an evaluation of interns' strengths and weaknesses, an assessment of whether interns are equipped with the requisite skills for the field, feedback from host supervisors regarding performance gaps between interns and professionals and strategies to address these gaps, as well as recommendations for enhancing the internship program.

5.3.1 Strengths

More than one-third (40%) of host supervisors praised interns for their willingness to learn and hardworking nature. Additional critical strengths highlighted by host supervisors include a can-do attitude, good research skills, efficient work, and timely delivery of quality results. For example, a Head of the Publication Committee commented, "[The intern] is diligent and holds a good attitude towards work and learning. Given proper guidance, the intern can always deliver work with desired results". Another comment by a Corporate Communications Manager of a multinational corporation was that "[The] intern is hardworking and willing to learn, can work effectively and seek solutions when facing

problems or hurdles."

5.3.2 Weaknesses

The qualitative data revealed that the most frequently mentioned weaknesses among interns were lack of initiative, proactive, and commitment to their work. One supervisor commented, "Some interns are good at 'showing' that they are committed and busy, but failed to deliver results." This comment coincides with the comments made by the Managing Director of Hair and Skin Care products who employed six interns. The Managing Director emphasized that interns "could perform satisfactorily if closely supervised and guided all the time." However, "The interns did very little if not supervised and couldn't really carry out work independently." This comment reflects the Chinese mentality: "Just do it, and the task will turn to how it is supposed to be." Another host supervisor commented, "Asking for clarification seems to reflect incompetency," therefore, "Like many interns, he tended to be quiet and stay in his workstation most of the time."

5.3.3 Most desirable qualities when selecting interns or professional Employees

The PR and advertising fields are highly demanding professions that require professionals equipped with good communication, event organizing, and multitasking skills. Twenty must-have desirable qualities were listed to gauge whether the undergraduate program has well-prepared our graduates to stay competitive in the job market. Of the 20 most desirable qualities when selecting interns/professional employees, host supervisors rank reliability, responsibility, can-do attitude, multitasking ability, and strong initiative are the top five critical characteristics that interns should be equipped with. Judging from the high mean scores of HOE quantitative data, it is evident that the undergraduate curricula have equipped students with the requisite skills. A comment by the host supervisor of the Hong Kong Police Force substantiated the desirable qualities our students have. The host supervisor reflected, "Throughout the internship program, the intern demonstrated high commitment and was willing to accept responsibility. He is energetic, self-motivated, cooperative, and dedicated, possessing essential attributes required to be a police inspector."

It is noteworthy that host supervisors did not rank English communication skills as prominent as expected. This may be inconsistent with the stipulated medium of instruction in Hong Kong tertiary education being English. However, the result may explain that host supervisors took the English proficiency of Hong Kong university graduates for granted despite their perception that Hong Kong graduates need a strong command of English language communication skills.

5.3.4 Performance gaps between interns and professionals and ways to bridge gap

The consulting report scrutinized whether there was a performance gap between interns and communication professionals in the host organizations, focusing on professionalism, interpersonal skills, and English communication competence. The results indicated that over 80% of host supervisors perceived a performance gap existed in a range of soft, hard, and transferrable skills. Some host supervisors of some Publication Relations companies commented, "A big percentage of interns struggled with English writing and speaking, as well as Chinese translation skills, which are crucial in public relations, marketing communications, and corporate communications." One Publication Relations director further commented that "In a multilingual environment like Hong Kong, being bilingual (English and Chinese) is seen as essential for interns to remain competitive."

One host supervisor commented on the importance of creativity and critical thinking when asked to offer suggestions to bridge the gap from being students to competent professionals. She suggested that interns must be more proactive and think of the big picture of the projects instead of merely listening

to the supervisor's command of what to do next." Other suggestions include: "Be confident, assertive, proactive, motivated, and observant." Some host supervisors also recommended that "interns should empower themselves and be "hungry" for industry knowledge and outreach with networking and gaining every possible learning opportunity from recruitment talks organized by potential employers and events organized by industry organizations. The interns should also "learn from top-notch real marketing and communication materials such as press releases, promotional flyers and collaterals prepared by leading businesses -- Microsoft, Coca Cola."

Generally speaking, the internship program was of good quality and competitive compared to programs at other local or overseas universities. As the independent consultant stated, "Most of the host supervisors felt that the internship program was effective the way it was, except for the comment on the duration of the internship." As shown in the host supervisor feedback form, more than 90% of the host supervisors thought the internship should be extended to six months or a year, allowing the interns to ingrain what they learn. "Given the 200 hours over two months, what the intern can learn is minimal in a multinational corporation", as commented by several host supervisors. Other suggestions are that "The internship program should better prepare students' mentality and mindset in addition to practical communications and PR tasks. It would also be valuable if the interns could obtain basic or essential project management or teamwork training."

6 Conclusion and Recommendation

This paper describes an internship program that aims to bridge classroom-based theoretical learning and experiential professional learning to nurture graduates who can compete successfully in the workplace. A multifaceted evaluation mechanism was employed to assess the internship program's effectiveness. The outcomes of this internship program have resulted in significant gains for both researchers and practitioners in the field of teaching and learning of an undergraduate curriculum and professional development.

6.1 Implications

6.1.1 For researchers

This internship program provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of bridging theoretical learning with real-world professional experiences. The multifaceted evaluation mechanism employed in this program can serve as a model for assessing the impact of similar initiatives in other educational settings. Researchers can further explore the integration of successful and unsuccessful intern experiences into classroom teaching development and the implications for student learning and professional readiness.

6.1.2 For practitioners

The outcomes of this internship program offer practical guidance for enhancing the teaching and learning experience of undergraduate students. From the teaching perspective, the successful and unsuccessful intern experiences can be integrated into the classroom teaching development. These lessons can be the cases that prepare students to solve real-world business and professional communication problems. The impact on the teaching of the internship initiative will focus on guiding and mentoring students to transition from the classroom to the workplace by providing them with real-life, experiential professional opportunities.

The impact on student learning is to enhance students' professional knowledge through a multi-leveled approach integrating classroom learning with professional practice and self-reflective assessment. The learning and teaching experience has been enhanced in three ways:

1. The integration of "hands-on" internships into the curriculum can significantly enhance students' learning efficacy by allowing them to apply theoretical knowledge gained in the classroom to real-life workplace situations, thereby deepening their understanding and learning.

2. The intentional interdisciplinary design of internship program provides practitioners with a framework for creating comprehensive learning experience that prepare students for diverse professional roles as the internship broadens learners' business, organizational, and technical knowledge. As reflected in their assignment, interns were involved in projects that required them to utilize their business knowledge, technical expertise, and communication skills simultaneously. By engaging in such multifaceted experiences, students gain a holistic understanding of how different disciplines intersect and complement each other in real-world professional settings.

3. The internship program broadened students' learning horizons and thereby has better prepared them for communicating and working more successfully in the international workplace in their future careers.

Overall, the implications of this research highlight the potential for internship programs to have a profound impact on both the teaching and learning experiences of undergraduate students, as well as their preparedness for the professional workplace. Researchers and practitioners can leverage these implications to further develop and improve similar programs in educational and professional settings.

6.2 Limitations

Although the findings of the current study have implications for future research, two limitations to this study emerged. First, the self-reported questionnaire data collected to measure interns' performance may have been moderated by the evaluators' psychological reaction to the performance quality. For example, one host supervisor gave most interns below-average marks. However, when examining the qualitative comments on interns' deliverables, it can be found that the numerical marks did not align with the qualitative comments. Consequently, defining the representation of marks with criteria would be essential to prevent such a situation.

Second, the present internship project was voluntary. Interns who participated in the project were highly motivated and had excellent attitudes toward it. What if the internship becomes a mandatory course? Will students have a similar attitude and motivation when carrying out their internship?

6.3 Recommendations

Based on the quantitative analysis of the interns' performance evaluation and the qualitative reflections, recommendations are made to bridge the gap from "students to competent professionals" by strengthening the essential soft, hard, and transferrable skills.

6.3.1 Recommendation 1 - Future research on the long-term impact of the internship may need to consider taking a longitudinal, ethnographic nature.

The current study examined the effects of a 200-hour internship program from the perspectives of various stakeholders based on quantitative and qualitative measurements. Although the study results have revealed desirable outcomes, the measurements were taken in the middle and after the internship. It can be arguable whether this impact is permanent. This underscores the necessity for a better understanding of long-term impact. In this connection, only longitudinal research design can address whether the 200-hour internship program can lead to long-term effects.

6.3.2 Recommendation 2 – Integrating the internship program with the yearly-long final-year professional communication project course

To respond to the criticism from the host supervisors, we propose extending and tying the 200-hour internship over the summer with the final-year Professional Communication Projects course. The course design blends theory and practice, emphasizing evaluation and analysis of the English language communication process. It provides a practical basis for critical thinking, allowing students to demonstrate their intellectual abilities and practical professional communication skills at a professional level. The practical production of a communication product (e.g., public relations campaigns, market research reports, training videos, staff handbooks, etc.) in collaboration with a host organization provides a stimulus for critical thinking, evaluation, and reflection of the entire communications process in the professional context.

As such, after the sophomore year of the internship, interns can choose the same host organization for their final-year professional communication projects. As the final-year project is a year-long course, the students can continue working on more substantial projects if they are clear about their career paths and want like to continue working in the same field or industry. On the contrary, interns who find that their internship field does not fit will have another opportunity to try different industries.

Appendix 1

Table 1
Mean Scores of 27 Items of Host Supervisor's Assessments on Intern's Performance

Variable	Mean
Professionalism	
1. Able to meet deadlines and work under pressure	3.98
2. Able to make decisions when needed	3.50
3. Exhibits initiative – a self-starter	3.75
4. Accepts direction from line manager	4.32
5. Eager to improve performance and learn from mistakes	4.06
6. Has good work attitude	4.30
7. Shows an interest in, and understands organization's mission and goals	3.77
8. Understands job responsibilities	3.91
9. Able to cope under pressure	3.70
10. Uses time efficiently (good time-management)	3.63
11. Produces quality work	3.97
12. Follows instructions	4.12
13. Prepares thoroughly for and contributes to meetings	3.55
14. Reliable	4.16
15. Punctual	4.31
16. Well groomed	4.20
Interpersonal Skills	
17. Deals professionally with co-workers and clients	3.92
18. Well liked and respected by co-workers and clients	4.12

19. Communicates well with others	4.02
20. Confident manner	3.81
Writing/ Communication/ Production Ability	
21. Grammatical accuracy	3.80
22. Expression of ideas	3.78
23. Word usage	3.77
24. Accuracy of spelling	3.98
25. Appropriate tone and style for intended audience	3.81
26. Sentences and paragraphs link ideas coherently	3.91
27. Consistent organization of content	3.85

Appendix 2

Table 2

Mean Scores of Host Organization Feedback on Internship Program

	Parameter	**Mean Score**
1	Overall competency in the workplace	3.59
2	Potential to succeed in a career similar to internship	3.46
3	Business efficiency by applying communication theories	3.22
4	Adaptability from classroom to real workplace	3.31
5	Ability to performance in the Hong Kong business context and culture	3.44
6	Ability to solve and handle real-world business communication challenges	3.30
7	Performance compared with real-world business communication professional	3.05
8	Possibility of hiring your intern(s) again after graduation if suitable positions arise	3.15

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