

Navigating workplace realities: A sector-specific analysis of administrative internship challenges in South Africa

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Abstract

Internships serve as an important bridge between academic learning and professional practice. However, their effectiveness varies across organizational settings. This exploratory study examines the sector specific challenges faced by administrative interns in South Africa, drawing on Human Capital Theory (HCT), Organizational Socialization Theory (OST), and the Job Demands-Resources model (JDR). Semi-structured interviews with seven interns revealed four dominant themes; bureaucratic and resource constraints, performance pressure and onboarding gaps, mentorship quality and learning curve, and cultural adaptation complexities. Public sector interns grapple with rigid hierarchies and slow decision making, while those in the private sector face high performance demands with limited support. Additionally, graduates interning in non-profit sectors, though exposed to diverse tasks, contend with resource scarcity and emotional fatigue. Across all sectors, inadequate mentorship, poor task-role alignment, and difficulty translating academic knowledge into practice emerged as critical barriers. The study advocates for structured, theory informed internship models that promote effective onboarding, inclusive cultures, and sustained mentorship. By addressing these systemic issues, higher education institutions and host organizations can enhance internship outcomes and better prepare graduates for workplace realities. This research contributes a multi-theoretical, sector specific perspective to the underexplored domain of administrative internships in South Africa.

Keywords: *career development, onboarding failure, intern burnout, internship ineffectiveness*

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1. Introduction

Administrative internships are a vital but under-researched area within graduate work-integrated learning. It warrants focused examination because of their unique role of molding early professional character and career readiness across diverse sectors. Administrative roles include various essential organizational purposes, from clerical duties, monitoring compliance, to steering procedural intricacies, that facilitate operational effectiveness while being ignored in internship research that emphasizes technical or discipline-specific experiences. Due to the persistent presence of administrative roles in public, private, and non-profit organizations, it is important to understand the sector-specific challenges experienced by these interns to bridge the gap between academic preparation and workplace realities. Moreover, administrative internships provide an exceptional lens to examine the way organizational systems, mentorship quality, and onboarding processes influence interns' ability to transform theoretical knowledge into practical competence, manage emotional fatigue, and also sustain engagement and growth.

Administrative internships, which typically involve graduates undertaking structured, short-term roles within organizational support functions such as human resources, finance, operations, and general office management, among others, are designed to expose interns to real-world administrative processes and workplace realities. These internships provide experiential learning and serve as a platform for harnessing essential soft skills and developing professional identity. Additionally, internships are a critical mechanism in the transition from higher education to industry, particularly in bridging the persistent gap between theoretical instruction and applied workplace competencies. In an increasingly competitive labor market, the absence of practical experience remains a significant barrier to graduate employability (Galbraith & Mondal, 2020).

Internships, therefore, serve not merely as supplementary experiences but as essential platforms for hands-on learning (HOL) a form of experiential knowledge acquisition that traditional classroom settings are structurally unequipped to replicate. For office administration graduates, internships provide exposure to the multifaceted demands of administrative work, encompassing clerical operations, client interfacing, and executive support tasks that require procedural fluency, adaptive problem-solving and reasoning (Dulpina et al., 2024; Cano et al., 2025). However, while internships are widely recognized for their developmental potential, they also function as sites of structural tension. Interns often navigate ambiguous role expectations, inconsistent mentorship, and resource constraints,

which can undermine the intended learning outcomes and exacerbate existing inequities in access to career advancement. This duality positions internships as both gateways to professionalization and potential vectors of exploitation raising critical questions about the institutional responsibilities of host organizations and the pedagogical alignment of higher education curricula with workplace realities.

Internships have become a cornerstone of experiential learning, serving as a strategic interface between industry and academia. Literature highlights the role of internships in equipping students, graduates, and career-transitioning individuals with the applied knowledge necessary for navigating workplace realities (Chisom, 2025). These programs are designed to facilitate the development of both domain-specific technical skills and cross-functional soft skills, which are increasingly recognized as critical for employability in dynamic labor markets (Gerçek, M & Özveren, 2024). Moreover, internships offer multidimensional value enabling career exploration, industry immersion, and the cultivation of professional networks (Qubati & Tammim, 2021; Alharethi et al., 2025). However, the internship model is not without its structural deficiencies. Empirical evidence reveals recurring challenges such as insufficient mentorship, misaligned expectations, and limited exposure to substantive job tasks (Cano et al., 2025). These issues are symptoms of a deeper systemic misalignment between the outputs of higher education institutions (HEIs), and the competency demands of employers (Mishra et al., 2019). This discourse affects graduate work readiness and imposes operational inefficiencies on host organizations, which requires additional resources in onboarding and training to compensate for graduate skill gaps. Drawing from the human capital theory perspective, graduate internships should function as high-yield investments in workforce development, however, when poorly executed, they can generate suboptimal returns for both graduates and host organizations (Sangeetha, 2022; Arthur & Koomson, 2024; Smith & Smith, 2024).

Despite the abundance of literature on internships, there is a notable gap of research focusing on administrative internships, a domain characterized by operational diversity and its reliance on procedural potency. In contrast to internships in specialized fields, administrative roles require a unique blend of various skill sets, i.e., clerical precision, interpersonal communication, and multitasking (Fadare, 2022; Tabish, 2024). Moreover, minimal studies exist which account for the perspective of interns and host organizations, particularly in relation to mentorship quality and organizational onboarding. This study, therefore, addresses

a significant gap by exploring the lived experiences of administrative interns in South Africa, highlighting the critical need for sector-sensitive, theory-informed frameworks that enhance support mechanisms and align internship conditions with the realities of administrative work environments. The objective of the study is to explore the lived experiences of administrative interns in navigating workplace realities in the public, private and non-profit sectors.

2. Literature Review

Internships have become a cornerstone of graduate career development, offering students practical exposure and the opportunity to translate classroom knowledge into solving real-world problems. However, the efficiency of internship programs in the South African context faces several challenges including sectoral affiliation, mentorship quality, and the degree of task-role alignment with long-term career prospects (Gercek & Özveren, 2024; Malbuyo et al., 2024; Yende, 2024). These challenges highlight critical gaps concerning the structural integrity and pedagogical coherence of internship models across different institutional settings. Theoretical support such as OST, highlight the extent to which interns are properly integrated into the organization and supported through quality mentorship and how these processes directly influence their identity formation, skill acquisition, and organizational culture (Liao et al., 2022; Adil et al., 2023; Frögéli et al., 2023; Gercek & Özveren, 2024). This study experiences and challenges of graduate interns housed across several sectors, public, private and non-profit host organizations.

2.1. Public Sectors

Internship programs within the public sector are frequently constrained by organizational red tape, regulatory overreach, and resource limitations that hinder developmental potential of graduate interns in their placements. Unlike their private sector counterparts, who often feature agile onboarding processes, and diversified task portfolios, graduate interns housed in public sectors are consistently confronted with procedural inactivity, narrowly defined roles, and systemic inefficiencies (Del Rosario et al., 2024). These delimitations are not incidental but deeply anchored within the structural and policy frameworks of government institutions, where risk-averse decision-making, and non-compliance operations dominate.

Several studies in the Philippines demonstrates that during the COVID-19 pandemic graduate interns faced several challenges, such as lack of hands-on experiences, communication gaps and limited opportunities to bridge theory and practice, resulting in under preparedness for professional work (Del Rosario et al., 2024). Similarly, in South Africa, Ngoepe (2024) argue that the Public Service Internship Programme (PSIP) in the Limpopo region encountered coordination failures across several departments and insufficient support mechanisms. In the Free State region, Litsoane (2023) underpinned several challenges including lack of mentorship and coaching of the graduate interns, lack of monitoring and evaluation of the PSIP and insufficient budget allocations to recruit more graduate interns. These systemic inefficiencies reflect a broader issue, the lack of synergy between academic institutions and public sectors hosting graduate interns, which undermines the alignment of internship tasks with graduate skill development (Yende, 2024). Moreover, resource constraints and rigid administrative cultures compromise the quality of the internship experience and negatively influence their perceptions of working in the public sector. In addition, the bureaucratic nature of public sector institutions in South Africa, while essential for governance, consistently limit experiential learning for graduate interns, raising ethical concerns about the potential exploitation under restrictive labor frameworks (Mseleku & Nyawo, 2024; Syamsudin, 2024).

2.2. Private Sectors

Internships offered in the private sectors are known for their high-performance expectations and competitive environments, which demand rapid adaptation and resilience from graduate interns. While these may encourage skill acquisition and hands on practical exposure, they inherit in them significant psychosocial stressors, anxiety, burnout, fatigue, and compromised work-life balance (Yi et al., 2022). Several studies (Clarke et al., 2025; Kim & Lee 2025; Yu & Xie, 2025) highlight the psychological toll of such highly competitive environments. Dong et al. (2023) found that nursing students exhibited persistent stress and anxiety post-internship, which was attributed to underdeveloped defense mechanisms and inadequate emotional support. In the South African context, Calitz (2022) posits that the national labor legislation lacks explicit provisions towards psychological safety of interns, thus, exacerbating their vulnerability to mental health challenges. This gap highlights exclusion of care towards graduate interns, especially in high-pressure sectors such as finance,

technology, cultural and creative industries, where graduate interns are overworked, under compensated and taken care of (Ahmad, 2020; Cockayne, 2022; Moody, 2022). Other studies by Jerez Gomez et al. (2023) and Mseleku (2024) highlight the importance of adequate support. Graduate interns may experience enhanced job satisfaction and accelerated development of critical competencies, including problem-solving, time management, and strategic thinking when adequately supported.

2.3. Non-profit Organization Sector

Graduate interns housed within non-profit organizations (NPOs) are faced with several opportunities and challenges shaped by the sector's mission-driven philosophies and resource-constrained operational models. While limited financial and infrastructural resources can restrict access adequate supervision, and structured graduate onboarding, several studies show that many NPOs have adopted robust and innovative strategies to alleviate these constraints. Samad and Ahmad (2022) highlight that the sector's reliance on collaborations across various sectors and resource pooling enhance intern support systems and maximize experiential learning. Additionally, Pope et al. (2015) emphasize that the NPOs strategic outsourcing of administrative functions, allows core staff to allocate more time to quality mentoring and sustainable capacity building for housed graduate interns. However, despite these robust and effective mechanisms, interns housed in NPO institutions are not immune to psychosocial challenges, i.e., emotional burnout, particularly given the nature of work that often involves confronting complex societal issues (Palitsky et al., 2022).

Table 1 highlights sector-specific insights (e.g., differences between public, private, and non-profit interns).

Table 1

Sector-specific contrasts

| Aspect | Public sector | Private sector | Non-profit-sector |
|----------------------------|---|--|--|
| Main challenge | Bureaucracy, red tape, resource restrictions | High demands, minimal onboarding | Chronic underfunding, resources lack |
| Professional growth impact | Less agile, slow professional progress | Onboarding gaps, stress, constant multitasking | Stress, burnout risk due to pressure & limited support |
| Support Structures | Lack; red tape limits effective mentorship & feedback | Poor onboarding, vague roles, lack of mentorship | Scarce resources limit structured support |

| | | | |
|---------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Adaptability Requirements | Steering hierarchies and bureaucracies | Unceasing adaptation to rapid changes | Creativity under constraints |
| Emotional implications | Frustration & disengagement | Stress & potential burnout | Anxiety & emotional fatigue |

2.4 Why Focus on Clerical, Compliance, and Procedural Aspects Matters

This section emphasizes the administrative role specificity: clerical, compliance, and procedural issues, which are rarely studied, to demonstrate the novelty of this paper.

Administrative internships entail repetitive but intricate clerical tasks rooted within stringent bureaucratic and amenability bases, often overlooked in wider internship literature. These specifics mold professional identities of interns and the transformation of academic knowledge into application. Resolving the exceptional challenges of technical inflexibility, compliance anxieties, and clerical workload can aid customizing internship programs to support interns effectively in understanding the core dimensions of administrative work. This can end up lessening burnout and enhancing engagement. Well-designed onboarding, clear role clarification, and mentorship focused on procedural competence are vital to equip interns for these administrative realities across sectors.

Multi-theoretical framework as a unique contribution. An exceptional contribution of this paper lies in its innovative use of a multi-theoretical framework that integrates HCT, OST, and the JDR model to expansively explore the lived experiences of administrative interns across diverse sectors. The study climaxes how sector-specific restrictions and organizational circumstances inspires the translation of academic knowledge into professional competence by applying HCT. Incorporating OST emphasizes the essential role of mentorship, onboarding, and organizational culture as social support systems that profile intern success and engagement. Then, the JDR model offers a detailed interpretation of how the interplay between high job demands (e.g., bureaucratic red tape & performance pressures) and limited resources adds to intern stress, emotional fatigue, and disengagement. This integrated theoretical framework increases understanding into the composite factors influencing internship outcomes and improves internship research by highlighting the moderating roles of adaptive capacity and sectoral context. In that way the study promotes customized, theory-informed internship frameworks that optimize both the development of intern and benefits to the organization.

Internal challenges. Beyond external organizational challenges, studies (Lo Presti et al., 2023; Alshammari et al., 2025; Leonov et al., 2025) emphasize the critical role of internal variables in shaping the effectiveness of internships experiences on the development and long-term career prospects of graduates. Several factors have been reported in literature, including

internship duration, which has been evidenced to influence learning depth and skill acquisition (Galbraith & Mondal, 2020; Jerez Gomez et al., 2023). Additionally, formalization of internship structures, i.e., clearly defined scope of employment, and performance expectations, which enhance engagement and facilitate more meaningful experiential learning (Mathiassen, 2024). Furthermore, motivational dynamics also play a critical role in reskilling graduate interns, with studies reporting that interns having meaningful tasks, recognized for their contributions, and supported report higher levels of perceived employability and work readiness (Anjum, 2020; Gilbert et al., 2022; Pianda et al., 2024; Schneider et al., 2024).

Several studies report concerning organizational culture and its critical role in reskilling graduate interns with practical skill sets necessary to navigate complex industry ecosystems, encouraging high level of job satisfaction, strong workplace identity and elevated task performance (Macedo et al., 2022). Moreover, other individual factors such as educational background, personal motivation, and the ability to adapt to changing work environments influence interns' onboarding. Additionally, access to supportive resources, especially digital tools and structured training materials, greatly boosts interns' ability to perform effectively and develop the practical skills needed to thrive in real-world work (Joy et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2023).

Comparative insights across sectors. Internships across public, private, and non-profit sectors present noticeably diverse settings that influence career readiness, experiences, and professional development of graduate interns in unique ways. In the public sector, internships are defined by organizational red tape, rigid bureaucratic structures, and limited resources. This generates thin, procedural roles with limited opportunities for experiential learning and professional growth. These are systemic challenges weakening alignment with academic training and are intensified by ethical concerns about exploitative labor conditions. This is particularly evident in contexts such a South Africa's Public Service Internship Programme.

In contrast, the private sector offers dynamic, high-pressure environments defined by hasty performance expectations and competitive demands that promote skill acquisition and practical exposure but exposing interns to significant psychosocial stressors such as anxiety, burnout, and scarce emotional support. These settings do not protect interns enough. This leads to mental health liabilities unless they are backed through targeted onboarding and mentoring. Private sector internships can quicken competency development in strategic and problem-solving domains.

Lastly, non-profit organizations offer a mission-driven context where resource scarcity and infrastructural limitations pose challenges for structured supervision and onboarding. Some NPOs mitigate these constraints using innovative partnerships and strategic outsourcing that enable focused support and mentoring to enhance capacity building. In spite of these strengths, NPO interns often confront emotional burnout due to the sector's engagement with complex social issues.

As a collective, these sectoral distinctions highlight the critical need for customized internship frameworks that distinguish diverse organizational realities [resolving bureaucratic inertia in the public sector, psychosocial hazards in private enterprises, and resource trials in NPOs] to enhance graduate intern development and wellbeing.

2.5 Conceptual Gap

This literature review section closes the review with a conceptual gap that justifies the study. Its narratives stresses that internships are essential for connecting academic learning and professional practice. It points out, however, that vital sector-specific and internal challenges destabilize their effectiveness in developing graduate employability and career readiness, mainly within the South African context. Rooted bureaucratic red tape, resource constraints, and limited mentorship hinder public sector internships. It causes narrowly defined roles and minimal experiential growth. Private sector internships offer expose interns to dynamic and competitive environments, to high psychosocial stress and insufficient psychological safety, intensified by scarce onboarding and support structures. Non-profit sector internships steer the tension between resource insufficiency and mission-driven innovation. However, interns still grapple with insufficient supervision and emotional burnout connected to the nature of their work. Within, factors such as extent, structure, expressive task engagement, organizational culture, and distinct flexibility impact internship outcomes. However, they are inadequately addressed in various internship models. Despite mounting appreciation of these intricate effects, there is a conceptual gap regarding how these sector-specific restrictions and internal dynamics jointly mold the lived experiences of administrative interns. This is an area distinctly underexplored compared to discipline-specific internships.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A qualitative exploratory research design was adopted in this study to investigate the lived experiences, perspectives, and challenges of administrative interns in different industry sectors, grounded in the findings of Lloyd and Gifford (2024) regarding its effectiveness in capturing lived experiences. This exploratory research design is particularly relevant given the limited existing literature on this topic.

3.2. Participants of the Study

This study employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques to recruit seven participants currently undertaking administrative internships across public, private, and non-profit sectors. Inclusion criteria focused specifically on interns engaged in organizational support functions such as human resources, finance, and general administration, while those in non-administrative roles were not included in the study. The respondents who participated are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Participant characteristics

| Respondent | Sector | Age | Background | Education | Gender | Race |
|-------------------|---------------|------------|-----------------------|------------------|---------------|-------------|
| A | Public | 28 | Internship in HR | Certificate | F | Coloured |
| B | Private | 22 | Internship in finance | Degree | M | African |
| C | Non-profit | 31 | Internship in admin | Degree | F | White |
| D | Private | 26 | Internship in admin | Certificate | M | African |
| E | Private | 29 | Internship in finance | Diploma | M | Coloured |
| F | Non-profit | 21 | Internship in HR | Degree | F | African |
| G | Public | 34 | Internship in HR | Certificate | M | African |

Table 2 presents data on seven respondents from diverse sectors: two from public, three from private, and two from non-profit. They range from 21 to 34 years of age, with gender distribution of four males and three females. Racially, they were three Africans, two Coloureds, and one White individual. Educational qualifications vary, with three holding degrees, one a diploma, and three certificates. The internship backgrounds span three in human resources, two in finance, and two in admin. Both public sector interns were in HR and holding certificates, with ages of 28 and 34. The private sector respondents were all male, aged between 22 and 29, working in finance or admin, holding qualifications from certificates to degrees.

Non-profit sector ones were younger females with degrees, engaged in HR or admin. Males were concentrated in finance and admin roles within the private sector, while females tend toward HR and admin roles in public and non-profit sectors. Those holding certificate were mostly in the public sector, somewhat older, whereas degree holders were younger and more rampant in non-profit settings. This group reveals diversity in background, education, and sector representation along with some grouping of characteristics by sector and role type.

3.3. Instrumentation and Data Gathering Process

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with seven administrative interns between October 14 and November 8, 2018. Interviews were held via both telephonic and face-to-face engagements, depending on the participants' availability and geographic location. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes, allowing for in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences across public, private, and non-profit sectors. The central question "*What challenges did you experience during your internship?*" was deliberately open-ended to encourage reflexivity and rich narrative responses. To ensure content validity and alignment with the study's objective, the interview guide was reviewed by field experts prior to implementation. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2023). This approach enabled a systematic yet flexible interpretation of participant narratives, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and the construction of complex themes grounded in lived experiences. To enhance analytical rigor and ensure transparency, the coding process was supported by Taguette, an open-source qualitative analysis software designed to facilitate reproducible and well-documented workflows (Limna, 2025). The themes were created from inductive codes, where *inductive coding* refers to a bottom-up or ground-up approach with the researcher starting with no predefined codes and generating codes directly from the raw data through close reading and iterative analysis (Coulston et al., 2025). Inductive coding was used because it is exploratory and allowed new themes, patterns, or theories to emerge naturally from the data. It was not

inhibited by prior assumptions. Inductive coding is especially used to explore where novel intuitions are pursued. It necessitates longer period and iterative enhancement.

3.5. Research Ethics

The data used for this study was part of the Master of Technology in Office Management and Technology. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Faculty of Management Science Research Ethics Committee, ensuring compliance with institutional and national research standards (Ref: FCRE2018/FR/04/023-MS). To ensure ethical compliance, all participants were provided with detailed information sheets outlining the study's purpose, procedures, and participants' rights, including the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Informed consent was obtained in writing before each interview commenced. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, participants' identities were protected using pseudonyms, and all data were securely stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team. Additionally, interviews were conducted in private settings whether telephonically or face-to-face to safeguard participant privacy and encourage open and honest dialogue.

3.6. Trustworthiness Strategies

Some strategies were used throughout the research process to boost the trustworthiness of the study. Peer debriefing was included. It entailed field specialists reviewing the interview guide before to data collection. This ensured content validity and relevance to the objectives. This assisted to refine the questions and abate researcher bias. During data analysis, inter-coder checks were facilitated using Taguette. Taguette's functionality reinforced joint authentication, promoting reliability and reducing subjective interpretation. Iterative coding enabled revisiting and refining codes to enhance dependability. Confidentiality and ethical rigor further supported integrity by nurturing a safe environment for sharing freely. Anonymization and secure data storage safeguarded the data integrity. Collectively, these strategies lead trustworthiness of the findings.

4. Results and Discussion

Key dominant themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews.

Theme 1: Resource Constraints and Organizational Red Tape

Interns in the public sector reported significant frustration with resource constraints and organizational red tape. Respondent A shared, “*There were limited resources and slow decision-making due to bureaucratic processes, highlighting the inefficiency that can be inherent in large, hierarchical organizations.*” Moreover, in the non-profit sector, resource scarcity was a recurring challenge. Respondent C noted, “*challenges of working with limited funds and the need to be creative in managing projects.*”

Public sector interns get frustrated with resource constraints and organizational red tape, which agrees with Thorp and Goldstein (2024) that bureaucratic hurdles stifle intern engagement and delay meaningful contributions. Nazrullaev et al. (2024) and Nugroho et al. (2024) also state how rigid structures deter organizational dexterity and innovation. On the other hand, Aggarwal et al. (2025) view organizational learning, culture, and human capital as key drivers of innovation. In rigid or bureaucratic organizations, where learning and adaptability are stifled, interns may struggle to develop professionally or apply content acquired in class in real-world settings. Also, in the non-profit sector, resource scarcity was a recurring challenge. While such environments can encourage adaptability, the constant pressure to thrive with limited support can lead to frustration, stress, anxiety and burnout (Ranabahu et al., 2020; Kakkar et al., 2024). Additionally, Hora et al. (2024) posit that such organizational red tape and resource scarcity could constrain interns in navigating complex hierarchical structures within organizations. This limits interns’ ability to effectively contribute towards professional and organizational development.

This aligns with the JDR model indicating that high demands coupled with low resources cause emotional exhaustion and disengagement. In South Africa, where public institutions often operate under bureaucratic constraints and non-profit organizations experience chronic underfunding, these findings have critical implications. The mismatch between academic preparation and workplace realities are more pronounced due to systemic inequalities and resource disparities persistent across demographics.

Frustration of public sector interns with resource constraints and organizational red tape explain OST’s observation about insufficient organizational socialization in bureaucratic settings. In these settings, rigid structures limit interns' ability to participate effectively in organizational norms and workflows. This also supports the JDR model displaying the way high demands (bureaucratic hurdles) united with low resources (scarce support; funding)

caused emotional exhaustion and reduced engagement among interns. From the HCT perspective, these restrictions deter developing and deploying interns' human capital. It prevents them from expanding learning and innovative contributions. In the non-profit sector, insistent resource shortage confirms OST's position on socialization problems in settings where interns are required to adapt fast without sufficient organizational support. This also stresses the relevance of JDR's stress-strain framework.

Theme 2: Performance Expectations and Onboarding Gaps

Interns in the private sector described high expectations and minimal onboarding support. Several respondents (B, D, & E) highlighted, "*the high expectations and demanding pace of private sector work, especially in consulting, banking, and insurance.*" Additionally, Respondent B, interning in private consulting, added, "*there was a lack of formal onboarding.*"

Private sector interns seem to have high expectations with minimal onboarding support. This reflects the JDR view that high demands and low support contribute to high stress and disengagement (Borders et al., 2024; Plasman & Thompson, 2024). This concurred with Kumar et al. (2024) and Miaary et al. (2024) that graduate interns in fast paced environments are confronted with high load and multitasking demands. Billett and Le (2024) argue that initial occupational preparation is no longer sufficient for long-term employability. Workers should always embrace technologies, organizational structures, and job expectations. Some authors (Jeske & Olson, 2022; Kirchner & Stull, 2022; Mafinejad et al., 2022; Margeviča-Grinberga & Kalēja, 2024) also believe interns enter organizations with preconceived expectations that, if unmet due to poor onboarding, lead to detachment and reduced commitment. It helps to initiate early orientation and shadowing to bridge the gap of expectations with actual job demands. Additionally, onboarding programs should address both social integration and functional role clarity. Similarly, Schneider et al. (2024) and Chadwick et al. (2025) show that interns who receive limited or no feedback, unclear role definitions, and insufficient mentorship struggle to perform as expected. These authors advocate for interactive, personalized, and continuous onboarding programs, not one-time orientations. Interestingly, Nunan et al. (2023) show divergent findings, that is interns in the construction sectors report positive relationship, growth, and enablement, among others. These highlight the role played by host organizations in shaping the interns for workplace realities.

Poor performance and stress that private sector interns experience reflect the OST argument that scarce onboarding upsets effective socialization. It leaves interns confused about roles and expectations. This supports JDR's view that high job demands mixed with inadequate organizational resources raise stress and disengagement. From HCT, misaligning interns' pre-existing human capital with actual job demands limits their professional growth and employability. There is a need for constant, interactive onboarding that enhances both role clarity and social integration. This theme validates the triadic interplay where organizational support (OST) and resource availability (JDR) affect the utilization and augmentation of human capital (HCT).

Theme 3: Mentorship Quality

Mentorship emerged as a critical factor influencing intern success. Respondent A placed in government sector shared "*It is difficult to obtain feedback from senior staff*". On the other hand, respondents D and F, respectively, noted, "*lack of mentors as we face steep learning curves*" and "*the difficulty in grasping technical terminology or applying academic theories to practical work.*"

Mentorship is confirmed as an influencer of intern success. The transition from classroom theory to applied knowledge presents challenges for interns and exposes a disconnection between theory and practice (Hundt, 2024; Silva, 2024). These inefficiencies are further intensified by deficient mentorship and the steep learning curves of real-world tasks contribute to professional isolation and stagnated growth of interns (Lampaco et al., 2024; Petrilli et al., 2022; Ying, 2024; Welch, 2024). Interns cannot master domain-specific terminology and adapt to unfamiliar digital tools that compromise communication efficiency and undermine performance expectations in settings that presume operational readiness without adequate training (Sigmundsson, 2024; Wang et al., 2024).

Mentorship quality affects interns' ability to transform academic theory into practice. It shows OST's assertion that socialization agents (mentors) facilitate professional identity development and command of organizational norms. Frail mentorship worsens the gap between classroom learning (HCT: formal human capital) and applied competencies. This harms interns' performance. In the JDR model, lacking mentorship is a resource shortfall that increases psychological demands. It causes professional isolation and stalled growth. Therefore, effective mentorship mechanisms are vital resource shields (JDR) and socialization

supports (OST) that facilitate human capital development (HCT). This is one way to empower interns to navigate complex workplace realities.

Theme 4: Organizational Culture and Task Relevance

Interns working in foreign environments are confronted with several challenges relating to cultural norms and communication gaps. Respondent G shared, “*working in a region with different cultural norms and language barriers was challenging as I had to adapt to change.*” Respondent E illustrates how strict compliance and security protocols were a hindrance in carrying out their tasks, “*Strict compliance and security protocols were time-consuming.*”

The study shows that interns in foreign environments face many challenges linked to culture and communication. Karimova et al. (2024) and Ligia et al. (2024) concur that cultural sensitivity and inclusive communication within an organization are important for graduate interns. Haq et al. (2024) advocate for inclusive practices to enhance unity and collaboration. Sigmundsson (2024), Aithal and Mishra (2024) states that compliance is effective in facilitating operational integrity, but it can overwhelm interns engaged in multiple responsibilities within an organization.

Problems linked to organizational culture and communication expose OST’s declaration that cultural sensitivity and comprehensive socialization practices are crucial for encouraging intern belonging and engagement. Host organizations’ inclusive cultures enable smoother integration and task relevance. On the other hand, exclusionary compliance demands delay engagement. HCT’s transfer and application of knowledge hinge on culturally supportive settings where interns perceive their tasks as relevant and meaningful. These findings stress that organizational culture facilitates the effectiveness of socialization (OST), regulates resource accessibility (JDR), and conditions the growth and application of interns’ human capital (HCT).

Table 3

Comparing sector-specific challenges

| Sector | Challenges |
|--------|---|
| Public | Resource constraints, organizational red tape, bureaucratic inefficiency, limited senior staff feedback |

| | |
|------------|--|
| Private | High performance expectations, minimal onboarding support, demanding work pace, strict compliance/security protocols |
| Non-profit | Resource scarcity, need for creativity in managing projects |

Table 3 compares the sector-specific challenges that administrative interns experience in the public, private, and non-profit sectors based on the themes from the interviews. This table recaps the principal challenges influencing the professional identity and career readiness of interns differently across sectors according to the interviews conducted.

5. Recommendations

This section provide sector-specific recommendations.

Public: reduce bureaucratic bottlenecks. Public sector recommendations (PSRs) is to focus on reducing bureaucratic bottlenecks and enhancing intern experience.

The public sector should restructure decision-making processes by implementing process re-engineering practices to lessen pointless bureaucratic steps delaying approvals and resource. This suggests allocation digital workflow systems that quicken communication and decrease paperwork lag.

This sector should increase resource accessibility for interns by allocating a devoted operational budget to support interns' events and learning needs, such as access to tools, data, and mentorship resources. This inspires resource sharing across departments to support interns' developments.

This sector should augment organizational socialization practices by aiding early and ongoing integration of interns into department workflows beyond admin duties to enable practical involvement in real projects. Use recognized socialization programs aimed at interpreting bureaucratic procedures to help interns to steer hierarchical structures efficiently in addressing OST insights.

This sector should develop flexible bureaucratic policies for interns by establishing exceptions or accelerated paths within bureaucratic processes for interns' tasks to avert disengagement and frustration. Regulate inflexible compliance necessities where possible to balance operational integrity with intern learning needs.

This sector should improve feedback and mentorship availability by creating organized feedback sessions that embrace mid-term and closing valuations to provide growth-oriented

guidance. Solicit senior staff as mentors with clear roles to guide interns through bureaucratic challenges and professional development.

This sector should encourage innovation and adaptive learning by encouraging an organizational learning culture that inspires interns to suggest improvements or innovations to address cultural rigidity. Partner intern projects with institutional learning and development initiatives to teach adaptive skills within bureaucratic settings.

Private: formal onboarding and mental health safeguards. Private sector focuses on formal onboarding and mental health safeguards to address high performance expectations and onboarding gaps. The public sector should:

Enterprise inclusive, personalized onboarding programs uniting role clarity, organizational culture acclimatization, and social integration.

Deliver continuing mentorship and real-time feedback to aid interns manage high demands while encouraging engagement.

Set realistic performance expectations and communicate these clearly during onboarding.

Integrate technology training early to reduce learning curve strains.

Non-profit: sustainable mentorship models despite limited resources. Non-profit sector recommendations focus on alleviating resource scarcity and burnout risks. They should:

Encourage creative resource management and avoid overloading interns; allocate workload evenly with clear task relevance.

Offer emotional and peer support structures to mitigate stress and burnout.

Strengthen partnerships with academic institutions for resource sharing and skill development.

Promote open dialogue about organizational constraints to align expectations and provide psychological safety.

Cross-sector themes and best practices

There should be formalized mentorship programs for converting academic knowledge into workplace competencies.

There is a need to cultural sensitivity and inclusion by encouraging culturally inclusive settings that respect diverse intern backgrounds, consequently augmenting belonging and task relevance.

There should be interactive onboarding as one-time orientations are inadequate and thus opening for nonstop, adaptive onboarding that address both technical skills and social integration.

They should address job demands-resources balance to implement resource-rich settings or reduce demands to prevent emotional exhaustion (leveraging JDR model insights).

6. Conclusion

This study highlights the complex and sector-specific challenges experienced by administrative interns across public, private, and non-profit host organizations. Drawing on qualitative data and grounded in HCT, OST, and the JDR model, the findings posit that while internships are widely regarded as critical pathways to professional development, their effectiveness is often undermined by structural inefficiencies, inadequate mentorship, and contextual misalignments. Inadequate mentorship, and contextual misalignments across public, private, and non-profit sectors. Public sector interns encounter bureaucratic inertia and limited decision-making access. Private sector interns, on the other hand, face high performance demands with insufficient onboarding support, while those in non-profit sectors, though exposed to diverse and meaningful work environments, struggle with resource scarcity and emotional fatigue. This study advances the internship literature by offering a multi-theoretical, sector-specific exploration of administrative internships, which is an area that remains underexplored, particularly in our setting.

By integrating intern and organizational perspectives, the study highlights how contextual realities shape internship outcomes and advocate for differentiated, theory-informed approaches to internship design and implementation. For HEIs, the findings highlight the importance of aligning academic curricula with workplace realities through stronger partnerships with host organizations. Structured onboarding, clear task-role alignment, inclusive organizational cultures, and sustained mentorship should be prioritized to enhance the developmental value of internships. Host organizations, in turn, need to recognize interns as emerging professionals and invest in supportive infrastructures that facilitate learning, integration, and well-being. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to assess the long-term impact of internship experiences on graduate employability and career trajectories. Additionally, the role of digital tools in enhancing intern support systems warrants further exploration. Finally, intersectional analyses that consider how gender, socioeconomic status, and geographic location influence internship experiences can offer deeper insights into equity

and access in work-integrated learning. Explicit contributions to theory, policy and practice are given in the next subsections.

7. Study Implications

This study explicitly advances theory by empirically demonstrating how many organizational, socialization, and cultural theories interconnect and apply differently across sectoral contexts in molding administrative interns' career readiness, experiences, and professional identities.

This study also supports the development of sector-tailored internship regulations that address unique challenges in resources, onboarding, mentorship, and cultural adaptation, thereby enhancing graduate interns' professional identity formation and career readiness within their specific sectors.

HR strategies for onboarding and mentoring need to focus on implementing formal, structured onboarding programs that communicate performance expectations and progressively introduce tasks, specifically in high-demand private sectors. Effective mentorship programs are essential. This applies to trained mentors who provide dependable feedback and support to help interns learn. Given resource limits and bureaucratic problems in public and non-profit sectors, onboarding processes need to be reorganized and resourcefully optimized. Moreover, onboarding need to include cultural orientation and ensure tasks comply with organizational protocols without causing unnecessary delays. This can encourage a supportive environment that enhances interns' career readiness across sectors.

Table 4 shows how HCT, OST, and the JDR model describe the key study findings on lived experiences of the administrative interns across public, private, and non-profit sectors.

Table 4

How the three theories (HCT, OST, JDR) explain the study's findings

| Findings | Human Capital Theory explanation | Organizational Socialization Theory explanation | Job Demands-Resources Model explanation |
|--|---|---|--|
| Resource constraints and bureaucratic inefficiencies | Limits to convert academic knowledge to valuable skills | Socialization of interns into organizational systems is difficult | High job demands and low resources cause frustration and burnout |
| Performance expectations and onboarding gaps | Skills/knowledge cannot fully develop without support | Role clarity and socialization hampered by absence of onboarding and feedback | High job demands with low onboarding/support increases stress |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Mentorship quality | Mentorship is essential for skill and knowledge acquisition | Mentors enable socialization and organizational learning | Mentorship is an essential job resource that cushions job demands |
| Organizational culture & communication challenges | Cultural barriers impede application of human capital | Absence of inclusive culture obstructs social integration | Deprived inclusiveness decreases available social support resources |
| Emotional fatigue and burnout | Hostile work conditions weaken human capital advances | Poor integration causes social withdrawal and isolation | Demand and resource imbalance causes exhaustion |

The theoretical lenses jointly show that intern development depends on their educational background and on the organizational environment. Specifically, on structured support, resource availability, and effective socialization within the organizational culture. Interventions to improve sector-sensitive onboarding, mentorship, role clarity, and wellness resources are thus critical to enhancing professional identity formation and career readiness as shown by the study. The study findings contribute to the HCT by illustrating how sector-specific constraints, organizational red tape, resource scarcity, and performance expectation, among others, can either enhance or inhibit the developmental value of internships. Further, drawing on OST and the JDR model, the study demonstrates that mentorship, onboarding, and organizational culture are critical indicators of intern success. These insights highlight the need for intentional, theory informed internship framework that integrates structured support, task-role alignment, and the inclusive practices to optimize both interns and organizational benefits. They also imply that adaptive capacity and sectoral context should be considered as moderating variables in future applications of the JDR framework. Furthermore, the study challenges the assumptions of HCT, revealing a persistent disconnect between university preparation and workplace realities. It argues for a more simplified understanding of how organizational conditions mediate the translation of educational practice into professional competence.

The study also highlights the importance of structured, sector sensitive onboarding programs. Host organizations should tailor onboarding processes to address the realities of their operational environments, such as simplifying bureaucratic procedures in public institutions or balancing performance expectations with adequate support in private sectors. Mentorship and role clarity must be prioritized, with interns receiving written job descriptions, performance metrics, and regular feedback to reduce ambiguity and enhance engagement. HEIs should collaborate with host organizations to augment internship frameworks that align academic curricula with workplace expectations, incorporating pre-internship orientation, reflective learning, and post-internship evaluation. Additionally, given the emotional fatigue

reported by interns, especially in resource constrained non-profit sectors, organizations should integrate wellness resources and resilience-building strategies into internship programs. These interventions can improve the satisfaction of interns, reduce their burnout, and enhance their long-term employability outcomes.

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