

A Study on Internship Exploitation

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ABSTRACT

Internships are traditionally intended to serve as educational bridges connecting academic theory to practical industry experience. However, this study reveals that modern labor market trends have transformed many internships into mechanisms for workplace exploitation. The primary objective of this research is to investigate the gap between educational expectations and actual workplace task assignments, focusing on how the lack of professional mentorship and the emphasis on non-essential tasks negatively impact student development. This study utilizes a quantitative, descriptive research design, gathering primary data from a structured survey of internship participants to evaluate metrics such as workload boundaries, financial compensation, and career milestone achievement. The analysis explores structural flaws in the contemporary job market, including the entry-level job crisis and organizational reliance on low-cost labor, which collectively enable exploitative practices at the expense of student well-being.

INTRODUCTION

An internship is traditionally conceived as a temporary, educational bridge connecting university classrooms to the professional arena. In an optimal system, these roles operate on a dual system of reciprocity: students offer dynamic perspectives and foundational skills, while companies return the favor with hands-on training, career guidance, and industry connections. Because the overarching intent is academic and developmental rather than economic, the success of an internship should be evaluated by the professional growth of the student rather than the monetary value of their labor.

However, modern employment trends have significantly compromised this model, shifting internships into a vehicle for workplace exploitation. This imbalance occurs when organizations capitalise on an applicant's lack of leverage to extract maximum work with minimal financial output. Primarily, this is visible when corporations substitute permanent, salaried personnel with underpaid or completely unpaid student labor. When an intern inherits the daily duties of a full-time staff member without receiving structured guidance or adequate pay, the role ceases to be an educational pathway and becomes a strategy for acquiring cheap labor.

Beyond structural displacement, this corporate overreach routinely manifests as excessive work hours combined with unrewarding tasks. Interns are frequently subjected to intense schedules matching those of senior employees, yet they are excluded from overtime pay or institutional protections. Rather than engaging in meaningful projects that foster skill development, they are often restricted to repetitive, low-tier administrative tasks like data entry or running basic errands. This issue is intensified by regulatory gaps that allow businesses to demand professional-grade performance under the promise of "career exposure," leaving unprotected students highly vulnerable to organizational misconduct.

Analysing the systemic roots of this problem reveals the structural flaws that allow these practices to continue. The foremost driver is the contemporary entry-level job crisis, where basic positions inexplicably demand prior work history. This institutional barrier creates an atmosphere of urgency, forcing graduates to tolerate substandard and unprotected

environments just to construct a competitive resume. Because the volume of desperate job seekers heavily outweighs available positions, corporate entities hold an unequal amount of market leverage, enabling them to impose unfavorable terms without risking a shortage of candidates.

From an organizational standpoint, the incentive to exploit temporary workers is anchored in aggressive cost-cutting and budget optimization. By relying on a continuous influx of temporary, low-wage labor, businesses can substantially trim operational overhead and artificially enhance profitability. This institutional behavior is protected by vague or poorly policed employment regulations that struggle to draw a clear line between legitimate trainees and exploited workers. As a result, an initiative designed to empower young professionals has increasingly turned into an unmonitored labor market that protects corporate interests at the expense of student well-being.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An internship is designed as a short-term, education-first gateway bridging academic theory and practical industry application (Brown, 2024). In its ideal form, it relies on strict reciprocity where students offer fresh insights and companies return the favor with hands-on training, career guidance, and mentorship (Morrison, 2022). Because the core intent is pedagogical rather than commercial, the success of the role should be measured by the knowledge an intern acquires rather than the financial profit they generate for the firm (Brown, 2024). It operates as a unique collaborative contract that remains fundamentally distinct from standard employment because its primary product is professional development rather than corporate output (Hurst, n.d.). However, contemporary labor market trends have severely compromised this educational model, converting internships into a primary mechanism for workplace exploitation (Hurst, n.d.). This exploitation occurs when organizations leverage an applicant's vulnerability to extract maximum organizational work with minimal financial compensation (Brown, 2024). Most notably, this manifests when corporations substitute permanent, salaried personnel with underpaid or completely unpaid student labor (Budirahayu, n.d.). When an intern inherits the day-to-day operational duties of a full-time employee without structured guidance or pay, the position shifts from a learning pathway into an abusive corporate strategy for cutting baseline labor costs (Budirahayu, n.d.). Beyond workforce displacement, this institutional overreach routinely subjects interns to grueling schedules that mirror or exceed those of senior employees without any overtime pay or legal protections (Yamada, 2016). Rather than engaging in substantive projects that build professional competence, interns are frequently restricted to repetitive, low-tier administrative tasks like data entry, filing, or running basic errands (Budirahayu, n.d.). This dynamic is intensified by regulatory loopholes that allow firms to demand professional-grade deliverables under the empty promise of "career exposure" (Curiale, n.d.). Because interns occupy a precarious legal gray area, they are heavily excluded from standard labor laws, leaving them highly vulnerable to organizational misconduct and unsafe working conditions (Yamada, 2016). Analysing the systemic roots of this problem reveals the structural flaws that allow these exploitative cycles to thrive. The foremost driver is the contemporary entry-level job crisis, where basic positions paradoxically require years of prior work history (Curiale, n.d.). This institutional barrier creates an atmosphere of desperation, forcing graduates to tolerate substandard and unprotected environments just to construct a competitive resume (Curiale, n.d.). Because the volume of eager job seekers heavily outweighs available positions, corporate entities hold an unequal amount of market leverage, enabling them to impose unfavorable terms without risking a shortage of candidates (Morrison, 2022). From an organizational standpoint, the drive to exploit temporary workers is anchored in aggressive cost-cutting and budget optimization (Holford, 2017). By relying on a continuous, rotating influx of low-cost or free student labor, businesses can substantially trim operational overhead and artificially enhance profitability (Hurst, n.d.). This behavior is enabled by weak, ambiguous, and poorly policed employment regulations that struggle to draw a clear line between legitimate trainees and exploited workers (Curiale, n.d.). Ultimately, the unpaid framework rewards corporate privilege and actively reinforces socio-economic inequality, turning an empowering educational tool into an unregulated market that commodifies student desperation (Yamada, 2016).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

While practical experience is a cornerstone of career preparation, there is increasing concern that internship programs are being leveraged as a source of low-cost, low-skill labor. This research explores the problem of internship exploitation by focusing on the gap between educational expectations and actual task assignments. The study aims to determine how

the absence of professional mentorship and the emphasis on non-essential tasks negatively impact the developmental outcomes for students

NEED FOR THE STUDY

The necessity of this research is driven by the growing trend of organizations utilising interns for basic operational support, a practice that frequently deviates from the core purpose of internships as a vital link between academic training and professional skill acquisition. There is a pressing need to empirically evaluate how the assignment of repetitive, non-academic duties and the absence of formal mentorship hinder the growth of students. This study serves to address this imbalance by providing data that can help educational institutions refine their internship vetting processes, empower students to identify environments that prioritise their development, and encourage employers to transition from using interns as low-cost labor toward providing structured, high-value professional experiences.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- 1.To quantify the frequency of non-educational tasks assigned to interns in relation to their total working hours to determine the degree of deviation from stated learning outcomes.
- 2.To analyze the statistical relationship between the provision of financial compensation (stipend/salary) and the frequency of reported workload exceedances beyond contractual hours.
- 3.To measure the correlation between intern participation in professional skill-building activities and their reported intent to pursue full-time employment in their respective sectors.
- 4.To compare the impact of institutional oversight (frequency of supervisor meetings) on the intern's reported ability to meet professional development milestones.

Hypothesis

Null Hypothesis : There is no observable evidence that the presence or absence of financial remuneration influences the incidence of internship duties extending beyond the formally stipulated contractual hours.

Alternative Hypothesis: The provision of financial compensation significantly correlates with the frequency of interns being required to work beyond their contracted hours, suggesting that paid internships are more frequently associated with increased overtime demands than unpaid roles.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research methodology is a systematic way of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data to achieve the objectives of the study. The present study is descriptive in nature and aims to understand the prevalence and impact of internship exploitation among students and recent graduates. Data was collected and analyzed using both primary and secondary sources.

Research Design

- The study follows a descriptive research design to investigate the disparity between intended academic milestones and the practical day-to-day duties assigned by employers.
- This design framework supports the orderly gathering and examination of empirical evidence concerning intern workloads, the sufficiency of workplace resources, levels of professional burnout, and the quality of institutional guidance.

Research Approach

- The required information was collected through a structured questionnaire.
- Direct interaction with respondents was utilized to gather first-hand feedback from those who have completed or are currently undergoing internships.

Sources of Data

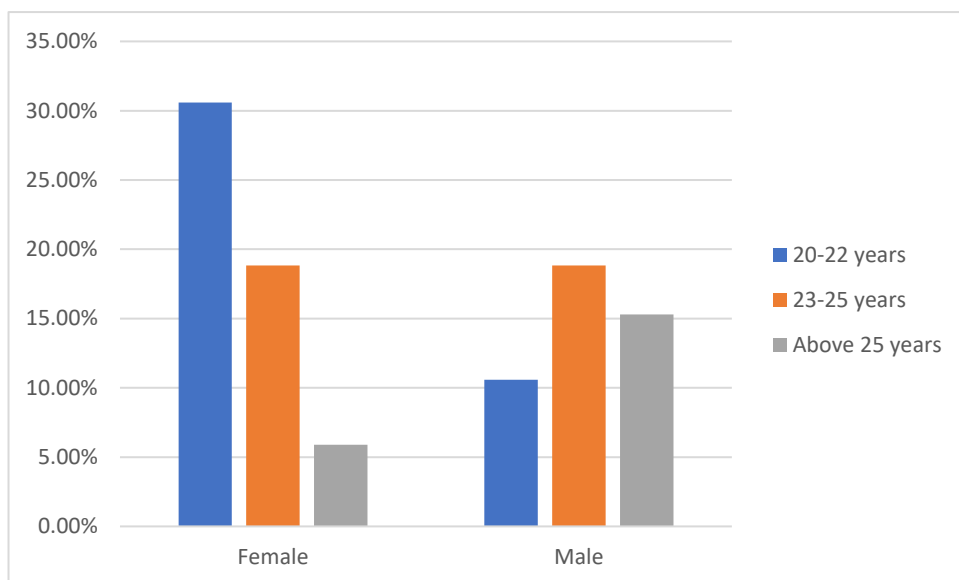
- **Primary Data:** Data was collected directly from the target demographic of internship participants through questionnaires designed to evaluate workload boundaries, financial compensation, and the attainment of career milestones.
- **Secondary Data:** Data was collected from peer-reviewed journals, labor market reports, legal publications, and industry analyses concerning workplace standards, corporate operational restructuring, and regulatory frameworks for trainees.
- **Sample Size:** A sample size of 85 respondents was selected for the study.
- **Sampling Technique:** A convenience sampling technique was used to select respondents based on their immediate accessibility, ease of contact, and voluntary agreement to participate.

Limitations of the Study

- The scope of the study is restricted to the specific feedback provided by the selected participant sample.
- The findings may not fully reflect broader industry variations, seasonal shifts, or distinct labor law enforcement strategies across diverse corporate sectors.

DATA ANALYSIS

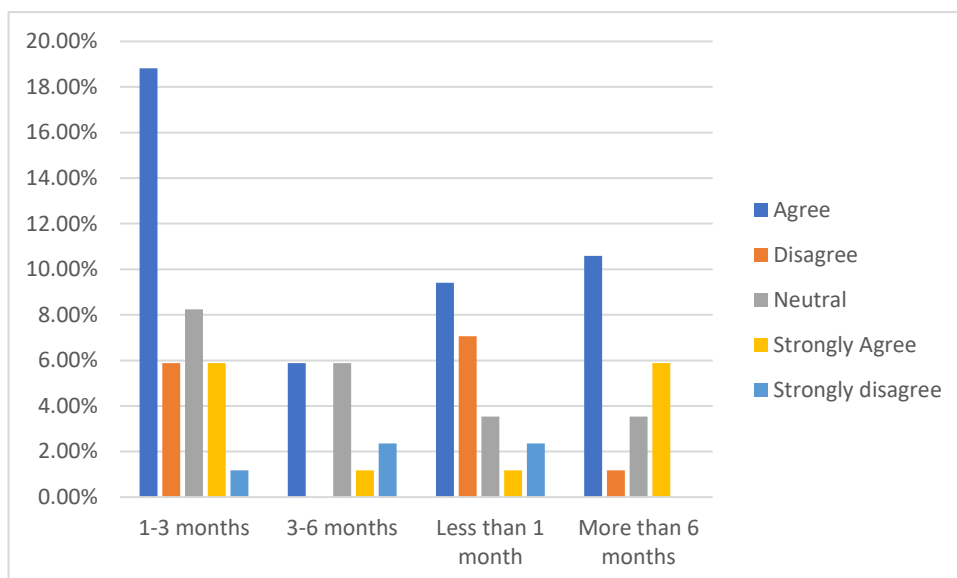
Demography & Age Group				
Gender	Age			
1.Gender	20-22 years	23-25 years	Above 25 years	Grand Total
Female	30.59%	18.82%	5.88%	55.29%
Male	10.59%	18.82%	15.29%	44.71%
Grand Total	41.18%	37.65%	21.18%	100.00%



Analysis: The table shows that 55.29% of the respondents were female and 44.71% were male. Within the age brackets, the 20–22 years group accounted for 41.18% of the total sample, followed by 37.65% in the 23–25 years bracket, and 21.18% in the above 25 years group.

Interpretation: A vast majority of interns (78.83%) fall into the under-25 age bracket. This demographic concentration suggests that these roles predominantly attract young people who are uniquely positioned to be taken advantage of in today’s professional landscape.

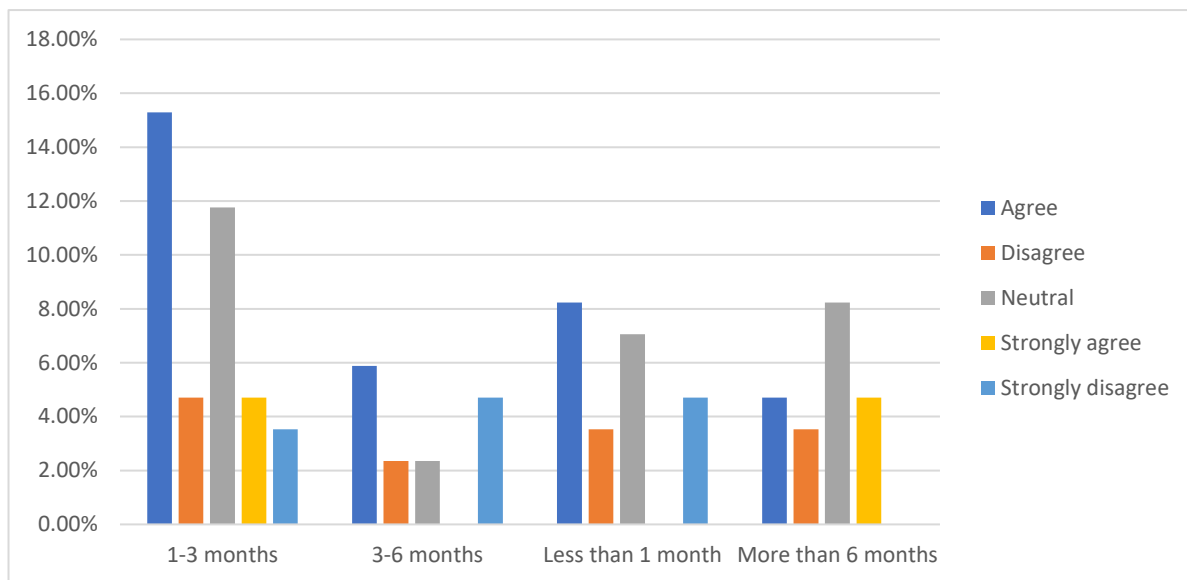
I 2. I feel that my current workload prevents me from achieving my learning goals.						
5.Duration of internship	Agree	Disagree	Neutral	Strongly Agree	Strongly disagree	Grand Total
1-3 months	18.82 %	5.88%	8.24 %	5.88%	1.18%	40.00 %
3-6 months	5.88 %	0.00%	5.88 %	1.18%	2.35%	15.29 %
Less than 1 month	9.41 %	7.06%	3.53 %	1.18%	2.35%	23.53 %
More than 6 months	10.59 %	1.18%	3.53 %	5.88%	0.00%	21.18 %
Grand Total	44.71 %	14.12 %	21.18 %	14.12 %	5.88%	100.00 %



Analysis: The data shows that 44.71% of respondents agree and 14.12% strongly agree that their workload hinders their learning goals. Conversely, 14.12% disagree and 5.88% strongly disagree, while 21.18% remained neutral. The largest concentration of those agreeing (18.82%) belongs to the 1-3 month internship duration group.

Interpretation: More than half of the study's participants (58.83%) feel that their daily duties detract from their primary academic goals. This indicates that internships are often failing to serve their intended purpose as structured training opportunities, instead prioritizing operational output over student development.

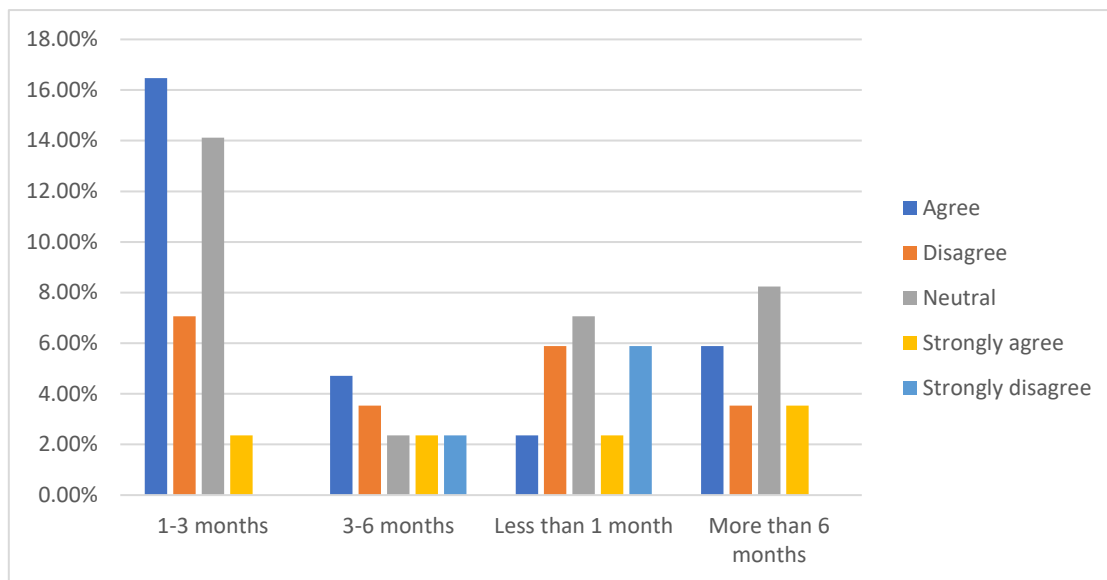
I 2.The tools and resources provided to me are inadequate for the tasks I am expected to complete.						
Duration of internships	Agree	Disagree	Neutral	Strongly agree	Strongly disagree	Grand Total
1-3 months	15.29 %	4.71%	11.76 %	4.71%	3.53%	40.00 %
3-6 months	5.88 %	2.35%	2.35 %	0.00%	4.71%	15.29 %
Less than 1 month	8.24 %	3.53%	7.06 %	0.00%	4.71%	23.53 %
More than 6 months	4.71 %	3.53%	8.24 %	4.71%	0.00%	21.18 %
Grand Total	34.12 %	14.12 %	29.41 %	9.41%	12.94 %	100.00 %



Analysis: According to the survey, 34.12% of participants agree and 9.41% strongly agree that their provided tools and resources are inadequate. Additionally, 29.41% felt neutral, while 14.12% disagreed and 12.94% strongly disagreed. The 1-3 month duration group reported the highest level of agreement with the statement (15.29%).

Interpretation: Nearly 44% of interns lack the essential tools or support systems needed to perform their jobs. This points to a clear failure by organizations to equip these workers for professional success, often leaving them to manage complex tasks without the necessary institutional support.

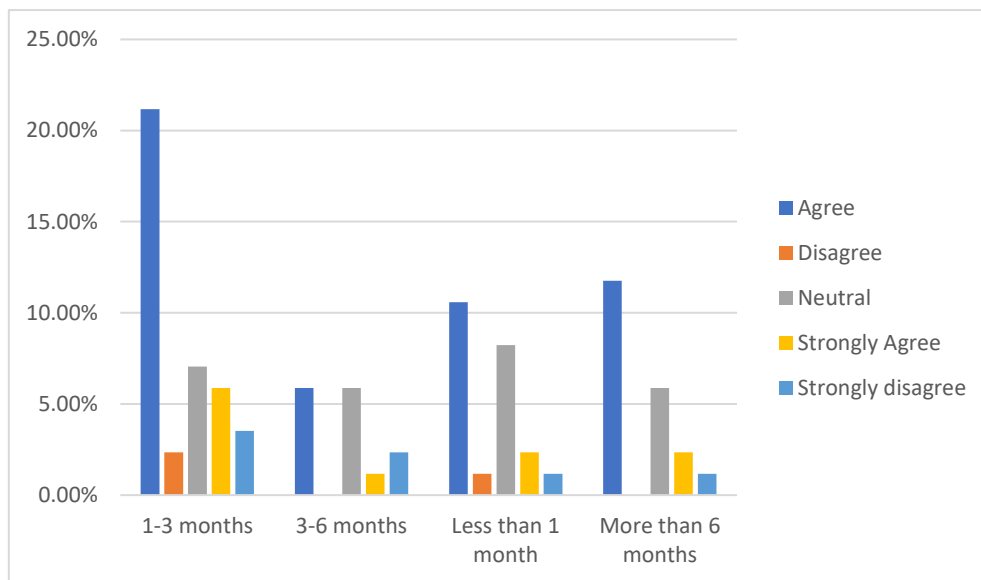
D1. I feel mentally or physically exhausted due to the nature of my internship responsibilities.						
	Agree	Disagree	Neutral	Strongly agree	Strongly disagree	Grand Total
1-3 months	16.47%	7.06%	14.12%	2.35%	0.00%	40.00%
3-6 months	4.71%	3.53%	2.35%	2.35%	2.35%	15.29%
Less than 1 month	2.35%	5.88%	7.06%	2.35%	5.88%	23.53%
More than 6 months	5.88%	3.53%	8.24%	3.53%	0.00%	21.18%
Grand Total	29.41%	20.00%	31.76%	10.59%	8.24%	100.00%



Analysis: The data indicates that 29.41% of respondents agree and 10.59% strongly agree that they experience mental or physical exhaustion. Furthermore, 31.76% of respondents selected neutral, while 20.00% disagreed and 8.24% strongly disagreed. Those in the 1-3 month duration bracket reported the highest agreement (16.47%) regarding exhaustion.

Interpretation: With 40% of the sample reporting physical or mental exhaustion, it is evident that many internships involve demanding or monotonous workloads that compromise student health. This exhaustion suggests that the volume of work assigned frequently exceeds reasonable limits for a learning-based role.

D2. I would recommend this internship program to a peer based on my experience.						
5.Duration of internship	Agree	Disagree	Neutral	Strongly Agree	Strongly disagree	Grand Total
1-3 months	21.18%	2.35%	7.06%	5.88%	3.53%	40.00%
3-6 months	5.88%	0.00%	5.88%	1.18%	2.35%	15.29%
Less than 1 month	10.59%	1.18%	8.24%	2.35%	1.18%	23.53%
More than 6 months	11.76%	0.00%	5.88%	2.35%	1.18%	21.18%
Grand Total	49.41%	3.53%	27.06%	11.76%	8.24%	100.00%



Analysis: Results show that 49.41% of respondents agree and 11.76% strongly agree that they would recommend their internship to a peer. Additionally, 27.06% were neutral, whereas only 3.53% disagreed and 8.24% strongly disagreed. The 1-3 month duration group showed the strongest support, with 21.18% agreeing to recommend the program.

Interpretation: Despite the clear presence of exploitative elements, over 60% of students would still endorse their experience to others. This suggests that students view these positions as an inescapable necessity for surviving a hyper-competitive job market, even when they recognize the flaws in the program.

SPSS TEST

Reliability Testing

Case Processing Summary

		N	%
Cases	Valid	85	98.8
	Excluded ^a	1	1.2
	Total	86	100.0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.796	5

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis Test Summary

	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig.	Decision
1	The categories of @1.Gender occur with equal probabilities.	One-Sample Chi-Square Test	.000	Reject the null hypothesis.
2	The categories of @2.Age occur with equal probabilities.	One-Sample Chi-Square Test	.000	Reject the null hypothesis.
3	The categories of @3. Educationlevel occur with equal probabilities.	One-Sample Chi-Square Test	.000	Reject the null hypothesis.
4	The categories of V4 occur with equal probabilities.	One-Sample Chi-Square Test	.000	Reject the null hypothesis.
5	The categories of V5 occur with equal probabilities.	One-Sample Chi-Square Test	.000	Reject the null hypothesis.

Anova and Co-efficients

ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	2.809	1	2.809	2.121	.149 ^b
	Residual	109.897	83	1.324		
	Total	112.706	84			

a. Dependent Variable: V15

b. Predictors: (Constant), V8

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	2.526	.386		6.540	.000
	V8	.166	.114	.158	1.456	.149

a. Dependent Variable: V15

Findings

- **Demographic Vulnerability:** 78.83% of the youth surveyed are under the age of 25, making them highly susceptible to workplace exploitation in a competitive job market.
- **Deviation from Objectives:** 58.83% of participants report that their daily internship tasks detract from their primary academic learning goals.
- **Inadequate Support:** 43.53% of interns lack the essential tools and resources required to perform their expected duties effectively.
- **Intern Wellbeing:** 40.00% of the sample reports experiencing significant mental or physical exhaustion due to their internship workload.

Conclusion

The study reveals that a significant number of internship programs have deviated from their original educational purpose, functioning instead as mechanisms for acquiring low-cost labor. While many students view these roles as an inescapable requirement to navigate a hyper-competitive job market, the lack of institutional oversight and poor resource allocation frequently results in student burnout and diminished developmental outcomes.

Suggestions

- **Academic Oversight:** Implement stricter university vetting processes to ensure internship providers offer structured mentorship and clear learning outcomes rather than just administrative labor.
- **Regulatory Reform:** Establish clearer labor guidelines that distinguish between legitimate educational trainees and exploited workers to ensure interns are protected from excessive, non-academic workloads.
- **Resource Standardization:** Require organizations to verify the provision of necessary tools and professional guidance as a prerequisite for hosting interns, ensuring the environment remains conducive to skill acquisition.

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