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Article

Generation Z “Life Skills” Acquired and Enhanced through Internships before and during COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: The paper explores “life skills” acquired and enhanced during an internship in preparation for the work of the future, identifies challenges faced and gaps between academic preparation and internship requirements, and explores the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on the internship experiences of Generation Z students. This qualitative study involves cohorts from 2016–2021, including 50 students before the pandemic, and 47 students during the pandemic, majoring in the field of Economy and Business. Data are gathered through 97 semi-structured interviews and written reports from the students. Interestingly, the findings showed that job placement is not the main reason why students pursue an internship; acquiring skills and experience was identified as the major motivating factor. “Communication” was the top enhanced skill from internships in both periods before and during the pandemic, while “relationship building” and “ethical issues” ranked as the second and third most important skills before the pandemic, to be replaced by “critical-thinking and problem-solving” and “analytical and technical” skills during the pandemic. Lack of accountability and COVID-19 stress were reported as the main challenges experienced during internships, while lacking hands-on experience and social skills were identified as gaps. The foremost pieces of advice for future interns revealed in this study are to get involved seriously and show respect and integrity.

Keywords: Internship; COVID-19; skills; challenges



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1. Introduction

In today’s competitive labor market, internships are becoming a must. They provide a unique opportunity for students to combine theory with practice. Through an internship period, students can acquire new technical and personal skills or improve their abilities. Moreover, a successful internship can provide students with a chance for future employment by shaping their professional and personal skills into those of promising candidates.

Based on our long teaching experience, we have noticed that there is a lack of hands-on experience among our students who graduate and are ready to enter the job market.

This research is important because, on one hand, the number of internships in business is increasing, and on the other hand, many authors still raise debate on this topic. (Marinas et al. 2021) conclude that there is a significant increase in the number of documents published after 2017 which indicate a growing interest in this topic among the scientific community. However, there is still a gap in the body of knowledge in this regard. According to (Vista 2020), there is no data-driven evidence on what skills are currently important and how internships help students transition into the workforce in the near future (Marinas et al. 2021).

The pandemic changed employee needs and expectations, and jobs require new skills to be performed (Shtembari et al. 2022). Weritz (2022) discusses that, on one hand, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding of critical skills; on the other hand, there is a lack of understanding regarding the relevant literature on how to train and adapt employees for the digital workplace.

All of the above leads to the need to understand how to equip students with the life skills sufficient to prepare them for future employment in business careers.

Considering this gap, we were motivated to investigate the internship topic as an important means to equip students with employable skills or “life skills”, as they are called by (Marinas et al. 2021).

The emerging research question of this study is:

How does internship contribute to the “life skills” of graduates so as to prepare them for work of the future?

This study was undertaken with the aim to identify skills acquired and enhanced from internships in business, to understand the challenges faced during this experience, especially during the COVID-19 period, and to reveal the best experiences from internships.

The results of 97 semi-structured interviews and written reports from business students remarkably showed that the main purpose for which Gen Zs undertake an internship is to enhance their skills or acquire experience, rather than job placement. Among skills mentioned by students, in both periods before and during the pandemic, “communication” was the most frequent one.

The skill set and other results identified from this study can be used in future research on similar topics. Furthermore, it can serve policymakers in higher education, universities, and employers interested to learn the most required skills from the labor market and draw recommendations or implement strategies for improvement. Lastly, students can use our findings to acquire an overall perception of their future internship experience and decide how to prepare themselves for the “life skills” required for future work.

2. Literature Review

Several authors have evaluated the benefits of internship experience to grade point average (GPA) when students return to the class (Griffin and Coelho (2019); Rigsby et al. (2013); Hergert (2009); Saxena (2012); Maertz et al. (2014); Knouse and Fontenot (2008) and (D’abate et al. 2009). The results of Rigsby et al. (2013) indicate that employing firms highly value internship experience and that internship experience is useful for students in getting job opportunities, whether or not they stay with the internship firm. Numerous studies highlight the expressed concerns of governments and industries about higher education’s ability to develop workforce-ready graduates (Griffin and Coelho 2019). Hwang and Kwon (2019) also explore the topic of competencies at the university level, but the skills of graduate students and their match with the labor market remain topics of debate. Rather than being incidental in the last few years, internships have become increasingly popular among business schools as they are considered a critical component of higher education (Kapareliotis et al. 2019).

In Europe, unemployment among college graduates stood at 50.8% in North Macedonia, 44.7% in Greece, 43.5% in Italy, and 24.6% in Spain (Mainga et al. 2022), while Albania lacks such information on this type of unemployment. Studies show that employment opportunities in the labor market are significantly influenced by the knowledge, skills, and competencies possessed by the job candidates (Marinas et al. 2021).

The uniqueness of an internship serves different purposes for different students (Abdullah et al. 2019) and serves as a valuable learning experience, contributing to their employability skills. Internship brings forth many advantages that interns can benefit from such as improvements in their career direction, job preparedness, marketability, job expectations, interpersonal skills, and leadership (Cook et al. 2000). According to Abdullah et al. (2019), organizations need to do a better job of allowing interns to follow through on tasks, keep them busy with meaningful work, and increase project responsibilities as their internship time progresses.

Interns should be given the ability to set priorities and be able to explore careers in other areas of the organization. (Knouse and Fontenot 2008) and other studies examined the usefulness of an internship experience for career exploration and reality testing, socialization into the norms of the workplace and its technical competencies, improvements

in knowledge acquisition, insight in preparing students for entry into the profession, and emotional sharing (Martin and Wilkerson 2006; Green et al. 2011). For example, Martin and Wilkerson (2006) examined the attitudes of students and found that an experience of an internship in business strengthens “the professional and business context of accounting students,” facilitating “more active, independent learning and problem-solving by students,” and is related to career enhancement more than academic performance. However, Wong et al. (2021) found that during the pandemic, when working from home, interns uncover several negative impacts on the internship, including ineffective communication and management practices, low work efficiency and quality, a lack of task variety and learning opportunities, and distractions in the home environment. While Reding and O’Byrne (2013) and Mainga et al. (2022) conclude that better development of interns’ professional skills, knowledge, socialization, and other abilities during the internship has a positive impact on job opportunities after the successful completion of the internship. Communication skills, both verbal and nonverbal, are important skills. Effective communication is essential in the workplace as the interns need to communicate with their superiors, colleagues, peers, customers, and clients (Abdullah et al. 2019).

Kapareliotis et al. (2019) found that students who attend internship programs positively assessed all aspects of the work readiness construct. They knew what employers expected them to do at work. Employers want job candidates to be able to solve problems creatively and handle common challenges that may emerge, and interns with strong life skills would be able to handle everything from interactions with others to identifying and processing their emotions (Abdullah et al. 2019). These life skills are important tools that make students stand out as the best candidates for future employers. However, not all relevant soft skills can be developed in the classroom or at the university (Mainga et al. 2022). This is one of the reasons that we emphasize the importance of pursuing internships.

Critical thinking and problem-solving skills, which are deemed important for employment in the current century, continue to gain attention and importance in the current and future educational environment, and yet education systems are only just beginning to formalize the frameworks for the teaching and learning of these skills (Care et al. 2018).

The academic staff and leaders of the University of New York Tirana (UNYT), Albania, believe that an internship in the labor market is of great importance and significance for students’ career aspirations, as discussed by (Marinas et al. 2021). UNYT has established an internship program since 2006 (Appendix A provides a description of the course) but no study has been conducted in this regard. According to the first-hand experience of one of the authors teaching the course of internship in business since 2015 at UNYT, initially, students wanted to take internships because they thought of it as an easy way to earn credits for their diplomas; recently, they have changed this perception and are interested to gain real-life experience from internships.

2.1. Generation Z and Skills of the Future

Gen Zs are considered digital-centric. Technology and social media are their identity, see Gaidhani et al. (2019) and Lev (2021), or the natural environment for Generation Z, see Dolot (2018). They are opinionated and entrepreneurial alongside being a spoiled and slowly maturing generation (Singh 2014). They have the ability to see things globally, have curiosity and innovativeness, and integrate well into workplaces with an advanced technological environment which provide meaningful occupation and worthy financial reward (McCrandle and Wolfinger 2014). Lev (2021) concludes that the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced many work perceptions and, to a certain degree, it is possible that it promoted many of Generation Z’s agendas, e.g., distance learning and working, increasing dependency on technology, and other skills that were not required in the past.

The new world order for business communication and operations will require significant skills in digital and mobile communication, argues Gill (2020). According to Van Laar et al. (2017), 21st-century digital skills are technical, informational, communicative, collaborative, creative, critical thinking, and problem-solving. While global reports such as

the [World Economic Forum \(2020\)](#) reports that the top skills and skill groups that employers see as rising in prominence, across industries, include critical thinking and analysis as well as problem-solving and skills in self-management such as active learning, resilience, stress tolerance, and flexibility. [Valentine et al. \(2021\)](#), after a critical review of the literature on skills for the future, concludes that, in spite of the uncertainty about the precise nature of the future, there is broad agreement about the likely skills requirements, which include: “cognitive skills: creativity, problem-solving, critical and systems thinking; collaboration skills: teamwork, communication, and emotional intelligence; digital skills; a range of mindsets: resilience, motivation, self-confidence, flexibility, and an enterprising outlook; self-management skills: career management and lifelong and agile learning; access to up-to-date information about the changing labor market”.

A later study by [Weritz \(2022\)](#) discusses that, on one hand, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding of critical skills; on the other hand, there is a lack of understanding regarding the relevant literature on how to train and adapt employees for the digital workplace. This calls for more empirical studies on this matter.

2.2. COVID 19 Pandemic and Internships

During the COVID 19 pandemic, many activities were shifted online, including teaching and learning. Many internships were questioned at that time. They were either delayed, canceled, or shifted online ([Teng et al. 2022](#)). The same happened for the first time with internships at UNYT since the course’s first intake in 2006. Concerns were persistent about the quality of virtual internships and whether interns could possibly engage in sufficient tasks, networking, and informal learning such as observing office culture and professional norms ([McGregor 2020](#); [Moreno 2020](#)).

The working environment has gone through major changes since the introduction of social distancing leading to remote and work-from-home due to COVID-19 strategies ([Gill 2020](#)). As the work environment moves from a 20th century man-powered workforce to 21st century technology-powered workplace, work-ready and purposeful skills are evolving ([Cook et al. 2000](#)). Furthermore, [Gill \(2020\)](#) states that what may once have been effective employability skills may not now be as effective in a post COVID-19 new world order.

Studies report the development of technical and soft skills, although e-internships, according to [Teng et al. \(2022\)](#), appeared to be less able to develop traditional soft skills (e.g., public speaking, interpersonal communication, networking, teamwork, and collaborative skills), and new 21st century skills ([Hora et al. 2021](#)). Furthermore, they report some challenges faced by students such as difficulty reaching the supervisor, inadequate communication, or a mismatch in intern–supervisor expectations.

Increasing attention has been dedicated recently to the contribution of internships in light of developing students’ skills or helping them to acquire new ones, which confirms the importance of this study. The literature examined by [Gill \(2020\)](#) has shown that graduate students who understand the notion of professional purpose for their chosen discipline are advanced in learning and are better placed to effectively transition from study to the workplace. His study results demonstrate that students who did internships during the pandemic have been exposed to a range of employability skills that will more likely become common in the workplace going forward.

Moreover, changes in the workplace due to the COVID-19 pandemic provoke great concern about the readiness of students as future employees. This study contributes to filling in this gap by exploring the role of internships in business and providing insights from students that have experienced an emergency working environment that will shape the working conditions and required skills of future work. Furthermore, it identifies challenges faced during internships and gaps that might exist between academic preparedness and employer requirements.

Reviewing the body of knowledge on internships gives the impression that internship experiences have helped students develop their skills in terms of career exploration and

reality testing, socialization into the norms of the workplace and its technical competencies, improvements in knowledge acquisition, insight into how to prepare students for entry into the profession, and emotional sharing.

Recent studies that explored internship outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic conclude that, despite many internships being either delayed, canceled, or shifted online, they reduced the opportunity to gain personal (soft) skills.

Overall, internships give students the opportunity to understand the basics of a workplace, the hierarchy, the relationships, and much more that could never be gained through studies only. Such an experience helps them improve their social skills, become valuable members of the working community, and work better in teams. Moreover, the whole experience teaches them important life lessons.

Lastly, we present in Table 1 below a summary of the skills for future work.

Table 1. Skills of future work.

Skills	Authors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical thinking and analysis; • Problem-solving; • Self-management: active learning, resilience, stress tolerance, and flexibility. 	World Economic Forum (2020)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical; • Transferable: digital literacy, critical thinking, creativity. 	Payton and Knight (2018)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cognitive skills: creativity, problem-solving, critical and systems thinking; • Collaboration skills: teamwork, communication, and emotional intelligence; • Digital skills; • A range of mindsets: resilience, motivation, self-confidence, flexibility, and an enterprising outlook; • Self-management skills: career management and lifelong and agile learning; • Access to up-to-date information about the changing labor market. 	Valentine et al. (2021)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital skills to reflect and accommodate changing work practices. 	OECD (2020)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Core (or soft) skills, which can confer a comparative advantage as they can be transferred across occupations. 	ILO (2019)

SOURCE: Author.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Approach and Sampling

The phenomenon of internships during the pandemic is new and there is limited data to be analyzed, so an exploratory methodology is adopted. Taking into account the exploratory nature of the study, the involvement of the students, and the desire to develop a more in-depth understanding of the phenomena, a qualitative study seemed most appropriate (Edmondson and McManus 2007). This qualitative study includes cohorts of internship students from 2016–2021, all belonging to Generation Z. The study adopts an inductive research approach. This approach is used to understand the empirical data and generate themes (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2021). The theory is reviewed to analyze and compare our empirical findings, thus providing a more organized, rigorous, and analytically sound qualitative study (Bingham and Witkowsky 2022).

The sample of the study consists of 97 (or 48% out of 203) senior students of the Faculty of Economy and Business at UNYT, majoring in Business Administration, Management, Marketing, Economics, and Finance and Accounting at the University of New York in Tirana (UNYT). Of these students, 50 took the internship before the pandemic started and 47 started their internship when the pandemic started.

From the sample of students involved in the study, the majority (67%) have family businesses, which initially indicated to the researcher that the primary reason these students have an internship is not job placement. This result was confirmed at the end of the study.

3.2. Data Collection

Data are collected through several instruments: (1) in-depth semi-structured interviews which allow the researchers to attain rich, personalized, and useful information (Burns 1999) as well as useful information related to maintaining the acceptability, authenticity, credibility, and quality of the research (Burns 1999); (2) written reports from the students at the end of their internship period. Semi-structured interviews conducted did not tend to rely on hypothesis testing; rather, they served to understand the “lived experience” of research participants (Dworkin 2012); as well as identifying skills developed through internships, they helped to capture insights into how the internship experience went and how students felt about the role of internship in terms of their acquired/enhanced skills and overall benefits. At the same time, reports and reviewed literature are used for data triangulation purposes.

Interviews before the pandemic were conducted in person; during the pandemic, interviews took place on the Zoom platform, with an average duration of 35 min recorded interview. All participating students signed a consent statement authorizing the usage of the data.

Respondents Background Information

Table 2 below represents data regarding the number, gender, and economic profile (major of study) of the respondent students included in this study.

Table 2. Background Information.

Characteristics	2016–2019		2020–2021	
	No	%	No	%
Major of Study				
BA/Management/Marketing	16	32	15	32%
Finance/Accounting/Economics	34	68%	32	68%
Gender				
Female	32	64%	25	53%
Male	18	36%	22	47%
Total	50		47	

SOURCE: Author.

3.3. Interview Protocol

The interview questions were semi-structured. Appendix B provides the interview guide. Both the interview protocol and the report template written by the students have the same structure, divided into four sections. The first section asks students where they spent their internship and seeks to capture students’ expectations about the internship, exactly what kind of work they did and how it fit into their host organization’s teams and goals, what skills they used and any new skills they gained, and their impressions of the people and the organization they worked with. The second section requires a description of the host organization and the department students worked at and its functions, followed by a brief description of their roles and main duties. The third section and the most important one is related to students learning experience; it aims to analyze the lessons learned during the internship. Particularly, they were expected to discuss:

- Skills acquired or enhanced during the internship;
- Problems faced and how they dealt with them;
- The best and the worst part of their internship experience (i.e., what were the biggest challenges, anything they wished to know before going on their internship, and what they might do differently the next time);

- How courses at UNYT prepared them for the internship;
- Gaps between the internship requirements and skills possessed (they were asked to describe the skills needed in the internship, and how to develop those).

The fourth section requires students' conclusions and personal reflections for the future, as well as any pieces of advice for future interns.

3.4. Data Analyses Method

Thematic analysis was employed for data analysis and coding reliability following [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#) and [Braun and Clarke's \(2021\)](#) step-by-step frameworks. The interviews were all transcribed and compared with the written reports which helped the authors better understand students' perceptions of their internship experience. This process helped us familiarize ourselves with the responses and increased the accuracy of coding as well as data reliability. The transcription of a couple of the interviews were coded by both authors, aiming to ensure the internal reliability of our data and provide intercoder reliability. The value of Cohen's Kappa considering paragraphs is 0.79, presenting a significant correlation ([Miles and Huberman 1994](#)) between coders.

Nvivo 12 software is used for interview coding and qualitative data analyses and interpretation. The usage of this software helped exclude human error and bias. At first, we fragmented the transcripts into units that captured a single thought or idea. Secondly, we created a list of open codes based on repeated topics and themes in the data using an inductive process [Hora et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Braun and Clarke \(2021\)](#). A frequency analysis of opinions (10 or more occurrences in the data) is used to identify the codes. Lastly, summative codes were generated by grouping words of the same root (e.g., technology, computer, and IT skills were grouped into technological skills), which were the basis for the descriptions presented in this study.

After the sixth interviewee before the pandemic, and the fifth interviewee during the pandemic, data became saturated and consistent with the research questions, indicating the achievement of the aims and objectives of the study ([Saunders et al. 2018](#)). In this context, 50 interviews conducted before the pandemic and 47 during the pandemic were considered enough.

4. Results and Data Analyses

This study explored reasons for pursuing an internship, revealed skills acquired or most developed through internships, problems faced, and gaps that exist between what can be learned in university and what the labor market requires, along with the advice students might offer future interns. Details are presented in the following tables.

Students began the interview and report by mentioning their motivation for doing an internship. Most of them were interested to develop their skills or to learn new ones and to gain hands-on experience and confidence in employing the knowledge and skills acquired from their academic preparation.

"During my years at university, I have always thought about how big companies work and how employees get along with each other". Other students say: "One of the things I wanted to understand for myself: how well do I work as a team member and how well do I work under pressure. My first expectations for the internship were to have a good time learning and make a name for myself". "My main goals were to firstly understand how to fit in, in a group with people different from my age, how to express my thoughts fully without being afraid of my lack of experience".

A few of the respondents confessed that internships helped them explore career options and occupations. For example, they state:

"This internship helped me understand whether I like . . . field or want to work in a different field from my studies. It helped me to shape my future carrier plans";

or “. . . . helped me understand my weaknesses and helped me work through them”; “I learned a lot and understood what I want to do later”.

4.1. Qualitative Analyses

The students’ answers to the questions in this study, after the transcription, generated different words for internship experiences. These words were restricted to nouns and adjectives only. Then, a two-word combination function was applied to the text of the comments by grouping those of the same root (e.g., technology, computer, and IT skills were grouped into technological skills), which resulted in 19 different combinations of skills.

4.2. Skills Acquired and/or Enhanced from Internships

This question is asked to all the students participating in this study. We obtained 97 valid answers. A spreadsheet with students’ comments is compiled using as a unit of analyses frequency of the distinct opinions emanated, grouped by similarity ($n = 97$). Only those that have 10 or more occurrences are considered. To understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, a frequency analysis of opinions (10 or more occurrences) is conducted separately for answers obtained from students doing internships before and during the pandemic. Table 3 represents data obtained from the experience of students. Internship skills before the pandemic are presented in columns 1–2, while columns 3–4 represent skills from the internships conducted during the pandemic.

Table 3. Skills acquired/enhanced from internships.

Skills	2016–2019 Frequency	%	2020–2021 Frequency	%
Communication	47	94.0	45	95.7
Relationship building	42	84.0	10	21.3
Ethics	41	82.0		
Team work	39	78.0	20	42.6
Technical skills	35	70.0	23	48.9
Technological skills	35	70.0		
Decision making	33	66.0		
Time management	32	64.0	10	21.3
Self confidence	32	64.0		
Goal orientation	31	62.0		
Open-minded	31	62.0		
Problem solving	29	58.0	36	76.6
Work/school-life balance	27	54.0		
Orientation for future career	26	52.0		
Responsibility & patience	24	48.0		
Efficiency and effectiveness	19	38.0		
Visionary	17	34.0		
Work under pressure	11	22.0		
Adaptability	0	0	10	21.3

SOURCE: Author.

From Table 3, we can notice that “communication” is the top skill improved after the internship, as stated by 94 % of the students involved in the study. In second place, 84% of the students mentioned “relationship building”, followed by “ethics” (mentioned by 82% of the students) and “teamwork” (mentioned by 78%).

“Some of the best soft skills that I improved were communication, time management, team management and being adaptive since in the beginning. I think these are some core skills which will really help me in every moment of my life”. “I did not quite know how to be a team player, however, I developed this during my time there”. “This experience was a good icebreaker and I soon made a lot of new friends in the organization. “I got out of my comfort zone. I was not anymore,

the introverted guy that would just do his work and then leave, but I started to talk more to other employees and create good relationships”.

“Technical” skills and “technological” skills are acquired by 70% of the students.

“During my time there, I greatly improved my skills related to databases . . . way better than I was before starting the internship. This is something that will be added to my CV”.

“Decision making” is developed by 66%, “self-confidence” by 64%, “open-minded” and “goal-orientation” by 62% of the students. The least developed skills are “work under pressure”, mentioned by 22% of the students.

In columns 3–4, we can notice that students mention a lower number of skills they developed from internships because of fewer tasks assigned to them. As stated by our respondent students, “internships were planned to last longer but due to the pandemic and the situation in our country, the officials saw it more convenient to shorten them”. Data in these columns still point out “communication” as the most important skill mentioned by the majority (95.7%) of students who were on internships during the pandemic, followed by “critical thinking/problem solving”, mentioned by 76.6% of them but not mentioned at all from previous cohorts of students. One might conclude that the difficulties created by the pandemic have revealed these skills as being very important to performing tasks in internships during hard times. Furthermore, we can notice that “relationship building” has dropped considerably since internships were performed mostly online.

4.3. Challenges Faced during the Experience

Table 4 below illustrates the challenges faced by students during their internships. “Lack of accountability” from employers represents the major problem according to 74% for students who did the internship before the pandemic (2016–2019). Since the majority of them had unpaid internships, they found themselves left aside in the workplace or performing simple tasks such as photocopying documents or ordering shelves.

Table 4. Challenges faced during Internships.

Challenges/Problems Faced	2016–2019 Frequencies	2020–2021 Frequencies
accountability	74%	43%
technical terms	70%	30%
report-writing	58%	11%
punctuality	36%	0%
teamwork	16%	0%
time-management	12%	4%
COVID-19 fear/stress	0%	77%

SOURCE: Author.

“I was feeling as if I was not given enough work to do”. “I did not want to ask my supervisor for more tasks, because I felt like she would not trust me with more work”.

“Technical terms”—since studies at UNYT are in the English language, students’ experienced difficulties when faced with technical terms in the Albanian language—and “report writing” were reported as major challenges, respectively, by 70% and 58% of the students.

“After finishing the tasks, I had to complete a report about them. I was given training about how to do the tasks, but never on how to write the reports”. “I also faced some difficulties in translating certain terms that I have learned at this university from English to Albanian, at the beginning of my work experience. But my co-workers were kind enough to help me find the equivalent terms in Albanian”.

When analyzing the experience of students who did the internship during the pandemic, as expected, “fear and stress” caused by the situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic was the major challenge (77%) for the students; it prevented them from fully exploring the benefits of internships.

“The biggest challenge for me was doing the internship in a period of time where we were not that safe. In the beginning, my parents did not agree with my decision of attending the internship at that time.” When I learned that I should continue the very last days working from home because I resulted positive for COVID-19, I was sad because I would have liked to finish my internship differently.” “Something else that encountered during my time there was the fear I had every day when going to the internship. This was more on a personal level, regarding COVID-19”. “The pandemic made me a lot more stressed each time someone in the workplace would get infected”. Someone else stated: “I was faced with two major issues, firstly making sure I was not COVID-19 infected for myself, which gave me a huge amount of stress. Secondly, I needed to do all the tasks by myself”. “The schedule became very hard to maintain since I had difficulties balancing my work hours with my classes”.

4.4. Gaps Identified between Academic Knowledge and Internship Experience

The following Table 5 generates the most occurrent opinions of students when asked about any gap they identified between what they learned at the university and what they needed to perform tasks assigned at internships. Most of the students who took internship before the pandemic (94%) noted that they wished they had “hands-on experience” before starting internships.

Table 5. Gaps between academic knowledge and internship experience.

Gaps Identified	2016–2019 Frequencies	2020–2021 Frequencies
lack of hands-on experience	94%	43%
social-skills	84%	83%
legal knowledge	34%	53%
team-player	16%	0%
efficiency/effectiveness	0%	66%

SOURCE: Author.

“Integration with colleagues and socializing” were mentioned as a challenge by 49% of the students involved in the study. Another challenge was “efficiency and effectiveness”, faced by 31% of the students. Students found it difficult to complete the tasks on time with efficiency and high quality. Other students (17%) said they had to have legal knowledge and follow up on all legislation issues at every step.

“The skills that I did not have were mostly social ones”. “Being a business administration student, I used to have a very theoretical and cliché idea of how a business runs. But now, after having had the gift of observation, experience and knowing some of the legal aspects and inner workings of business activities in general, I can definitely see myself one day fulfilling one of my biggest aspirations, becoming an entrepreneur”.

4.5. A Piece of Advice for Future Interns

When asked to give a piece of advice to their fellow students who would like to go for an internship, participants said that they simply advise them to enjoy every day of this experience. They state that “even though it looks like the internship lasts a long time, the end comes very fast”. Pieces of advice, as shown in Table 6, relate to carefully listening to the mentor, taking part in any activity, trying to learn as much as possible, and creating a

network that you will need in the future. However, the most important thing, stated by the majority, is to “be patient “and “be yourself”. Furthermore, they state:

“ . . . enjoy every single day of this experience, if a possibility for an internship is offered, do not lose that opportunity”. “Be punctual. Take the time needed to complete your tasks, and make sure that the tasks are the best version of you”.

Table 6. Advice for future interns.

Advice	Frequencies No	%
be patient	53	55%
be yourself	51	53%
respectful	49	51%
sick-advise	45	46%
punctual	33	34%
enthusiastic	28	29%
network	27	28%
take it seriously	15	15%

Summing up, Table 7 below represents themes identified in student descriptions of their internship experiences which contribute to the achievement of the objectives of this study. Themes are grouped, as recommended by [Hora et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Leoni and Cristofaro \(2022\)](#), into five categories: skills acquired/enhanced from internships, challenges faced with pursuing an internship, gaps identified, reasons to pursue an internship, and a piece of advice for future interns.

Table 7. Themes identified from internship experiences.

Theme	Theme Description
Skills acquired/enhanced from internships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exchanging information verbally or nonverbally; • Interacting with others and building good relationships; • Performing tasks according to accepted behaviors and moral principles; • Work together with others in groups and learn to be able to communicate effectively, collaborate on projects, and support your teammates; • Using job-related or technical skills; • Abilities and knowledge needed to interact with computer-based technologies and perform technical tasks; • Using cognitive skills to select among alternatives and take a decision, stay accountable towards decisions taken; • Use time well to cope with classes, internships, and other engagements; • Trust in your abilities, qualities, and judgment and build a self-confidence; • Set goals and work towards their achievement; • Listen to other people and consider new ideas, suggestions, and opinions; • Define a problem, identify the cause find the solution, or adopt to changes; • Accomplish tasks to the desired results with less wasted time and competencies; • Plan the future with wisdom; • Try to finish tasks despite their level of difficulty or time constraints.
Challenges faced during internships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of knowledge on compiling and writing a report on given tasks; • Elevated stress and fear due to the pandemic of COVID-19; • Lack of accountability from the mentor’s side. Being left aside in the workplace or performing simple tasks such as photocopying documents or ordering shelves; • Being punctual with the time schedule; • Perform tasks in teams; • Managing the time between classes and internship; • Comprehend technical terms in Albanian language when students are used to English as their language of instruction.

Table 7. Cont.

Theme	Theme Description
Gaps identified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work together with others in groups and learn to be able to communicate effectively, collaborate on projects, and support your teammates; • Develop verbal and nonverbal skills to communicate with others; • Not having work experience; • Not having legal knowledge concerning documents.
Reasons to pursue an internship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore career options and identify the most suitable occupations; • Gaining confidence in tasks to be performed; • Develop new skills and enhance current once; • Gain the hands-on experience needed to bridge academic knowledge with future employment.
A piece of advice for future interns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrive and be on time; • Show how much you like or enjoy the internship experience and show enthusiasm in tasks you perform; • Show dedication and attention; • Have patience to learn new things; • Be respectful; • Ask for clarification for things you do not understand and sick for advice; • Try to socialize with other employees and build your network; • Be true to yourself and others.

SOURCE: Author.

5. Discussion

This study explores the reasons why students pursue internships and explores the skills acquired and developed after the internship, along with challenges and gaps identified during the experience. The results unearthed the top three reasons students pursue internship experiences: gaining real work experience, building resumes, and learning new skills, as confirmed by [Rigsby et al. \(2013\)](#) and [Reding and O'Bryan \(2013\)](#). Moreover, "gaining confidence" was mentioned by most of the students, as stated in [Hergert \(2009\)](#) and [Van Laar et al. \(2017\)](#). However, different from previous studies, our results showed that employment is not the primary reason for undertaking an internship; instead, the desire and need for further skills development is considered by students to be the main purpose. What students expect from internships is growing professionally, exploring which kind of knowledge acquired from their studies can be applied in the workplace, and gaining or improving skills. Moreover, [Mainga et al. \(2022\)](#) conclude that internships contribute to the better development of interns' professional skills, knowledge, socialization, and other abilities.

The findings showed that students perceived internships as a tool to understand if they can see themselves in the same profession in the future. There were a few cases in which students said the internship served to help them explore career options. Career exploration was also pointed out by [Knouse and Fontenot \(2008\)](#).

Regarding skills gained or enhanced from internships conducted before the pandemic, "communication" appeared to be the most frequent skill mentioned by our students, as emphasized by [Van Laar et al. \(2017\)](#); [Saxena \(2012\)](#); [Knouse and Fontenot \(2008\)](#) and [D'abate et al. \(2009\)](#). This finding goes along with other skills developed during internships such as problem-solving, critical thinking, interpersonal skills, and the ability to work in a team, all considered to be "very important for entry-level graduates to be effective and efficient on their first job" ([Finch et al. 2013](#); [Lim et al. 2016](#); [Abdullah et al. 2019](#); [Marinas et al. 2021](#)). To continue, "ethics" follows as an important skill developed during workplace experience, as discussed by [Abdullah et al. \(2019\)](#). One surprising finding of this study was the discovery that the majority of the students (70%) claim to have improved their technological skills, given that the participating students belong to Generation Z, the generation understood to be very familiar with technology, or tech-savvy as called by [Poláková and Klímová \(2019\)](#). Gen Z is born and brought up with the current technology,

they are digital-centric and technology is their identity [Gaidhani et al. \(2019\)](#) or a natural environment for Generation Z ([Dolot 2018](#)).

Comparing findings from data related to internships before and during the pandemic, respondents report fewer skills developed, as found by [McGregor \(2020\)](#); [Moreno \(2020\)](#) and [Feldman \(2021\)](#), due to shorter internships or fewer tasks assigned to them because of the lockdown. Although the duration of the internship was short, students say that they learned fundamental things ([Valentine et al. 2021](#)). Internships conducted during the pandemic helped the majority of the students enhance their “communication skills”, in contrast with findings from [Teng et al. \(2022\)](#). “Critical thinking/problem solving” was reported by 76,6% of them but not mentioned at all in previous cohorts of students. This study has revealed these skills as very important to performing tasks in internships during hard times. Such cognitive skills are considered skills of the future ([Valentine et al. 2021](#) and [World Economic Forum 2020](#)). Furthermore, we can notice that “relationship building” has dropped considerably since internships were performed mostly online. While “ethics in the workplace” is not on the list of skills developed during the pandemic, confirming the concern of [McGregor \(2020\)](#) and [Moreno \(2020\)](#) regarding the lack of possibility to observe office culture and professional norms.

Another contribution of this study is the identification of the challenges and gaps students face during their internships. One of the biggest challenges students faced during internships was a lack of accountability from the employer/mentor, a finding that is not mentioned in previous studies but has an important role in the effectiveness of the internship in students learning. Furthermore, they had difficulties integrating with colleagues and socializing, a challenge discussed by [Teng et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Knouse and Fontenot \(2008\)](#). This was mentioned by 49% of the students involved in the study. Another challenge, however, was to complete the tasks on time with efficiency and high quality, as noted by [Rigsby et al. \(2013\)](#) and [Hergert \(2009\)](#), mentioned by 31% of students. Other students (17%) said they had to have legal knowledge and follow up on all legislation issues at every step.

When it comes to a piece of advice related to internships, the participants recommend such an experience to everyone. They advise being punctual at the workplace, being careful with everyday communications with colleagues, helping each other, being interactive, trying to finish assigned tasks on time, and not procrastinating. Moreover, they admitted to learning how to deal with problems in working place, as concluded by [Mainga et al. \(2022\)](#), and, by learning, you grow more and more.

6. Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Research

6.1. Conclusions

This study has achieved the research objectives which enabled us to fully answer the research question and provide some valuable conclusions. The study showed that the majority of students state that the experience as an intern was very useful and important, not only for their future career, but also as an experience that they will always remember, however challenging. Moreover, the study showed that job placement is not the primary reason why students pursue an internship; rather, acquiring skills and knowledge gained is identified as the primary motivator, as mentioned by [Rigsby et al. \(2013\)](#).

The main reason that pushed our students to go for an internship was to gain experience, as discussed by [Reding and O’Bryan \(2013\)](#). The majority of the students said that they wanted to try themselves in a working environment, to gain practical experience, to develop their skills, and to acquire technical knowledge ([Reding and O’Bryan 2013](#)). Internships ([Moghaddam 2011](#)) help students to grow in their future career plans stated ([Teng et al. 2022](#)).

The study found that “communication” was the most enhanced skill mentioned by both categories of students who did internships before and during the pandemic, contrary to [Teng et al. \(2022\)](#), who state that internships during the pandemic were less able to produce traditional skills such as “communication”. While the importance of ethical issues

stated in [Teng et al. \(2022\)](#) was reported by the students who took the internship before the pandemic—it was a new skill that was not learned in classrooms—students who took the internship during the pandemic did not mention it at all.

Furthermore, this study has revealed cognitive skills as very important to performing tasks in internships during hard times. It pointed out that “critical thinking/problem-solving skills” were reported by many students who took the internship during the COVID-19 pandemic but were not mentioned at all from previous cohorts of students. Such skills are considered skills of the future ([Lev 2021](#) and [World Economic Forum 2020](#)). Moreover, we can notice that “relationship building” mentioned by [Maertz et al. \(2014\)](#) and [Knouse and Fontenot \(2008\)](#) among the benefits of internships, has dropped considerably during the pandemic since internships were performed mostly online. Indeed, by reviewing the literature, we have not found it among the list of future skills either.

Finally, this study came up with some valuable pieces of advice and recommendations for future interns.

One piece of advice is to take the internship as a very good opportunity for the future and to be eager to take every opportunity given by the University because it not only helps students gain real-life experiences from excellent institutions, but also helps them to connect theoretical knowledge gained through courses with real-life professions.

Secondly, an intern should be motivated, be dedicated, and show a willingness to work. Students suggest to their fellows to feel free to ask questions and consult with mentors because they are there to help, making the internship experience a useful one. Last but not least advice, a piece of advice for future interns is to choose the internship relevant to their studies.

To conclude, comparing the findings of this study in terms of skills obtained or enhanced from the internship (presented in [Table 3](#)) with the results from the literature review (presented in [Table 1](#)), we can conclude that internships pursued by our students offer a considerable contribution to gaining the skills required for jobs of the future.

6.2. Implications

This study provides some theoretical and practical implications. From the literature review standpoint, this study provides a list of skills of the future that can be utilized in further studies on internship or HR research topics. Furthermore, it provides a complete picture of the internship experience and comparisons between two periods, before and during the pandemic. Such results can be used in further studies that aim to investigate the purpose of why students do an internship, the benefits of the internship, or the challenges faced during such an experience.

The practical implications of this study can serve policymakers in higher education, universities, students, and employers. Universities should update their curricula to fill in the skills gap and equip students at the end of their studies with skills that match the labor market’s requirements. Extracurricular activities that help students acquire social skills should be incorporated into the academic program. Moreover, universities should increase their collaboration/agreements with businesses to provide more opportunities for internships. Students should choose their internships according to their profile of studies. Moreover, they should be proactive and willing to learn. Employers should be more accountable and engage interns with meaningful tasks from which they can learn, even in unpaid internships.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

This study represents the perceptions of students from one university and business majors only. Therefore, the data collected may not be representative of students enrolled in other institutions and majors. However, the understanding of these participants’ experiences adds to the body of literature featuring business undergraduate work experiences, particularly for Albania and the Balkan region. The same study could be conducted in other universities to enlarge the pool of students. It would be useful to continue this study

from a different perspective, such as to investigate employers' perspectives related to the skills they are looking for in fresh graduates, especially after the pandemic, which forged a new normality in the work environment.

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Appendix A

Internship Course Description at UNYT

UNYT has established an internship program since 2006. This advanced-level course is offered to senior students (third or fourth year of their studies) at the bachelor's level. It examines and integrates regular ongoing formal learning activities with related work experience during the normal semester period.

The main purpose of this applied learning activity is to engage students in a professional setting pertinent to their concentration and career goals. The internship provides the unique opportunity, therefore, to combine theory learned from classes taken during the academic career at the university with practice in a business setting.

Upon successful completion of the internship, students should be knowledgeable of the career tracks for their majors and the types of organizations and institutions operating in their profession, understand the relationship between employees and employers, explore different working environments and be prepared to make the best of the internships as a learning experience and as an opportunity to start building a professional network, increase awareness of their own behavior and work skills, enhance interpersonal skills and group work, and be prepared for a life outside school.

This internship program enables businesses, governmental, and non-governmental agencies to see students in action. The goal is for students to enhance their skills, gain practical experience, and establish long-term relationships with institutions with which the university cooperates.

At the end of the internship, students are required to submit a written report, their mentor evaluation, and deliver an oral presentation on their experience and answer questions from the course instructor and their peers.

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

I. General Questions

- When did you start your studies at UNYT? How old are you?
- What is the major of your study?
- Do you have any work experience?

- Where did you do the internship?
- What was the purpose of wanting to do an internship? Why did you choose this internship?
- Can you please tell me your expectations about the internship?

II. The Host Organization

- Can you please describe the host organization briefly: nature of work/industry and its operations?
- In which department did you work and which were its functions?
- Which were your role and main duties?
- What are your impressions of the people and the organization you worked with?

III. The Learning Experience

- Which were the skills you acquired or enhanced during the internship?
- Did you face any problems? How did you deal with them?
- Can you please tell me the best and the worst part of your internship experience? What were the biggest challenges? Anything you wish you'd known before you went on your internship and what you might do differently the next time?
- How did courses at UNYT prepare you for the internship? Can you name the courses, can you state specific material from the courses that were helpful in the internship?
- Did you identify any gaps between the internship requirements and your skills? Can you please describe the skills needed in the internship that you did not have, and how you developed them?

IV. Conclusions and personal reflections for the future

- How do you think your internship will influence your future career plans?
- Can you give any piece of advice for future interns?

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