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THE ROLE OF INTERNSHIPS AND WORK-BASED LEARNING IN ENHANCING GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY: BRIDGING THE GAP WITH LABOR MARKET NEEDS

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Abstract: *Malaysia witnesses a gaping difference in academic knowledge gained by graduates and the required practical skills demanded by employers, which create a very major skills gap and complicate the employability of graduates. This disparity has forced many students not to find employment associated with their qualifications. Programmes such as internships and experiential learning initiatives are important in addressing this issue by exposing students to real-world practices and bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. This research examines the benefits and challenges of such initiatives, highlighting their role in equipping graduates with critical skills such as problem-solving, communication and adaptability. It further emphasizes the need for heightened collaboration between industry and academia, by which government support may align the outcomes of education to the changing demands of the labour market.*

Keywords: *Graduate employability, skills gap, industry-academic collaboration, labour market needs*

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Introduction

Employers are searching more and more for graduates who contribute more than simply academic knowledge to the competitive job market of today, both domestically and internationally (Moo & Wan, 2023). This is especially important in Malaysia, as the labor market requires workers with job-related skills and the flexibility to adjust to changing industry demands. As a result, modern demands are so great that the conventional approach to academic preparation for work is starting to fail faster than ever. Today, one of the areas where internship and work-based learning (WBL) components are fast increasing and at the same time imperative for empowerment of graduates-from local to global are the challenges faced in employability. Germany, Australia, and the United States have had strong WBL systems that integrate real- life experiences and higher education, which receive enormous chances of employment by graduates for example, more than 85% of graduates in Germany find employment within six months of finishing their studies. This highlights how effective structured WBL programs are in closing the gap between school and the real world (Trade Economics, 2022). The programs are all geared towards teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving, which are critical to success in the current labor market.

While more graduates are entering the workforce, the majority struggle to meet the demands of their professions. Most of the time, employers mention the mismatch between academic curricula and the actual needs of the workplace. About 60 percent of Malaysian employers stated that new graduates lack essential skills (Hassandarvish, 2020). This gap is recognized in the Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education), which likewise advocates that higher education institutions adopt any strategies that can ensure their graduates are made industry ready. One strategy is work-based learning (WBL), which can include internships, apprenticeships, and industry placements (Thapa, 2024). In Malaysia, WBL has gained traction as an effective tool to align academic programs with labor market demands.

These programs give students experience in their field, develop the required skills for attending the workplace, and integrate them into the realities of their employers. For instance, the new work-based learning (WBL) program was introduced in 2015 by the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia, as part of the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education), termed "2u2i." The prescribed structured approach to WBL is as follows: the 'u' shows the university which emits these establishments as universities, colleges, polytechnics, and community colleges, whereas the number 2 indicates the two years spent in academic institutions. When students learn with the "I," it represents and refers to the work-based learning component of this system while number 1 denotes one year spent in the industry. Moreover, even 3u1i and 1u3i exist, where '3' would indicate the time spent in academia, while '1' indicates the typical number of years spent working in the industry. This degree format has enabled students to develop networking opportunities, and exposure to the industry, as well as front-line or on-the-job experience early in their schooling. The purpose of this degree also is to strengthen the students in academic knowledge and to strengthen practical skills toward a more comprehensive preparation for entry into the workforce. By 2017, out of 20 public universities in Malaysia, six had adopted this model (Yusof et al., 2020). There are various statistics and key initiatives in Malaysia emphasizing the importance of internships and work- based learning (WBL). They play a major role in improving graduate employability by making academic experiences more relevant to labor market requirements (Moo, 2024). Examples of the highlights and initiatives that underscored their significance include:

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As of 2023, the employability rate of Malaysian graduates stood at 67.9%, indicating that more than two-thirds of new graduates were employed. However, a graduate unemployment rate of 10.2% suggests significant issues with the transition from school to work. According to Statista (2023), the labor force participation rate among highly educated Malaysians is still quite high at 74.8%, and the real skill match is still a major barrier to completely hiring people. Programs of Work-Based Learning (WBL) comprising structured programs have shown promise in solving these problems by further instituting collaborative opportunities between universities and industry. Meaningful internship opportunities are often enjoyed mostly by nationals in urban centers, leaving large voids for many students in rural areas. Further, some internships do not have acquired tasks where they can find value in developing skills (Moo, 2024).

That is essential to the effort to expand and enhance WBL programs to fulfill Malaysia's goal of becoming a high-income economy. Industry must actively participate in the planning and execution of internships to guarantee that students gain exposure to cutting-edge technology, practical skills, and problem-solving techniques. This is what Malaysia can certainly do to offer regional differences as well as ensure proper placement of its graduates, and provide skills necessary to survive in areas like technology, manufacturing, and services. The disparity in quality across the internships is perhaps one of the major issues in Malaysia (Mokhtar et al., 2024). Some programs make out quite well while training, mentoring, or otherwise guiding the students, whereas most will at best be able to define their engagement activities by a couple of memos and thus disqualify most of them as real development experiences. Additionally, the absence of some industries affects placement opportunities in some sectors specifically in rural regions. Therefore, the universities need to redesign their existing program and internship curricula to the market demand with proper consultation with employers.

Based on this consideration, work-based learning could be one of the possible solutions to address Malaysia's skills gap, but this will depend much on the institutions of learning, businesses, and policymakers who are going to invest it with time and resources. As stated by Ali and Marwan (2019), WBL is one platform for students to gain real work experience and create students who can meet the demands of the workforce. A well-structured WBL ecosystem can increase the marketability of graduates, reduce unemployment, and contribute to the country's economic growth by producing a workforce that is not only skilled but also adaptable to the rapidly evolving job market (Sutarto & Sari, 2023).

Discussion

The concepts and role of internship and work-based learning

Work-based learning (WBL) involves some strategies that provide students with the application of both theoretical and technical skills in a real-world situation that ultimately leads to employability (Molodchik et al., 2020). This is the space where students can experience practicalities and the knowledge behind the scenes that are necessary for their careers ahead of graduation. In Adot et al. (2021), WBL is theoretical knowledge with practical knowledge. This is a combination of theory with practice that becomes valuable at the time when an educational institution intends to close the learning gap against the needs of industry. WBL learning will usually contribute to employability in ways that are specific to that model. Internships, apprenticeships, and mentorships each provide different ways for developing work-related skills. Thus, internships can be defined as short-term work experience placements designed to expose students to different aspects of a particular sector of industry. On the other hand,

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apprenticeships are usually longer in duration and much more specifically skill-oriented in one profession. Both models incorporate hands-on action to improve employability, although they differ in their depth and duration.

For instance, internships often serve as avenues through which students can explore more than one career path, whereas apprenticeships train people over a much longer period in a very specific skill. Every WBL model offers the possibility of building up key competencies such as communication, problem-solving, teamwork, and adaptability. However, they differ concerning the transferability of these competencies to full-time employment opportunities. Internships are the most likely to lead to job offers, but not guaranteed. The percentage of internships that result in permanent employment depends on the student's performance, the level of the internship program, and the industry's hiring practices (Ali & Marwan, 2019).

In Malaysia, Workplace-based learning (WBL) is also gaining importance in improving employability in higher education. For instance, Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation has started a digital internship program for the above objective. It is designed to address and promote the skill gap for a swiftly growing strength in the country's technology realm. The MDEC offers an internship program through collaborations with technology companies, providing students an exposure to the latest digital tools and practices. This development will enhance technical skills as well as employability since the skills will be aligned according to what is needed in the digital economy. It was found that 60% of MDEC trainees surveyed secured a full-time job within six months of termination (Ibrahim et al., 2019). While this confirms that the training program has turned out successful as far as improving employability is concerned, it must be noted that such achievements may not be generalized across industries because of different successes obtained from training programs based on sector and region.

Internships are short-term opportunities, typically lasting weeks to months, that focus on general career exploration or industry exposure. They help develop soft skills like communication and teamwork, as well as providing networking opportunities and potential job offers. In contrast, apprenticeships are long-term programs, usually lasting 1 to 6 years, designed for in-depth skill development in a specific trade or profession. They focus on technical, hands-on skills, often leading to certification and specialized expertise, with the added benefit of full-time employment upon completion. In addition, internship supports career readiness through interaction with professionals in the field and exposure to a work environment, while apprenticeship prepares workers to step into a career through meaningful, productive work combined with related classroom instruction. The two strategies provide different outlooks on employability relative to the kind and extent of the acquired skills (Suyitno et al., 2025).

Apart from in-class training, work-based learning also includes work learning-based programs such as internships and apprenticeships. However, more important than all of these is that it provides real work experience outside a classroom (Moo, 2024). It is these that start to link the knowledge they've learned with real industry demands. In Malaysia, it has been noted that programs like the digital internship initiative by MDEC have done wonders in training students with skills that are in high demand from companies. On the flip side, internships can be considered broader in their industry exposure compared to apprenticeships, which offer specialized on-the-job training for sustained long-term growth in careers. The trick is that bringing WBLs into higher education prepares the students better to contend with the job market and thus brings them closer to adaptability to an industry changing

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Addressing the challenges of internship and work-based learning for graduate employability in Malaysia

Internships and Work-Based Learning (WBL) programs in Malaysia play a crucial role in preparing graduates for the workforce by bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical skills. These programs offer valuable hands-on experience, allowing students to apply what they've learned in real-world settings. Additionally, they provide opportunities for networking, professional growth, and insight into industry-specific practices. As a result, graduates are better equipped to meet the demands of their future careers, with a stronger understanding of workplace expectations and enhanced employability. Both programs do, however, have some obstacles that may prevent them from succeeding. Indeed, one of the predominantly marked issues stands between the universities and the employment requirements for employing graduates-the mismatches that exist between the two conditions reeling out on the employability stance in the country. Traditionally, universities have emphasized theory and expect recent graduates to possess the basic practical skills required of an employee as applicable to their disciplines. According to Zainudin et al. (2023), 70% of Malaysian industries believe that the curriculum should be aligned to the industries because fresh graduates lack the basic technical and soft skills to be immediately productive.

The other issue is that such unpaid internships deprive students of limited finances access to practical learning experiences. The Employment Act 1955 does not set a minimum wage for interns, and they either get stipends or work without pay in Malaysia. Approximately 45% of the interns in Malaysia earn less than RM1,000 per month, and out of these, 20% do so without any remuneration, according to survey data obtained from Job Street in 2023. The burden therefore weighs heavily on low-income students and adds to the limited accessibility of internships for career readiness. Additionally, industry participation in work-based learning programs is critically insufficient. Most Malaysian companies, however, see these programs as benefiting only educational institutions more than enterprises, which results in low participation rates in such programs. According to Musset (2019), only 30% of SMEs in Malaysia are believed to be partaking actively in work-based learning programs; hence the availability of meaningfully practical experiences for students remains significantly limited.

Thus, approaching these challenges calls for a multi-dimensional strategy. Accordingly, universities should design a curriculum in tandem with industries, which best reflects the demand of the market concerning the skills necessary for labor market entry for their students. Students should be able to avail themselves of structured internships offered by industries along with a commensurate salary and mentorship. Some government incentives could include tax exemptions or subsidies to encourage businesses to offer paid internships. It would foster stronger partnerships of academia, industry, and government and thus enhance the effectiveness of WBL programs in preparing graduates for the needs of an evolving job market (Akter et al., 2024).

Comparison between traditional learning and work-based learning in bridging the gap with labor market needs

It is more important than ever for graduates to have both theoretical knowledge and real-world experience in the quickly changing employment market. While traditional education provides a solid foundation for students to gain the necessary academic abilities and intellectual tools, it frequently falls short of properly preparing them for the challenges that await them in the real world of work. The part of learning through traditional education is theoretical knowledge, which is important for analysis and problem solving as much as an understanding

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of the deep subject is quite necessary for the attainment of each dimension. Though not limited, this does not always match what is asked in the industry and the kind of specific skill a potential employer in that job field expects in dynamic fields such as technology and healthcare (Cababaro, Almazan & Bueno, 2024).

Work-based learning (WBL) is an effective measure that fills the gap between students and true experience in the job options they will choose. Via internships, apprenticeships, or job placements, students will practice what they learned theoretically in real-life situations while learning invaluable soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and adapting to change. An aspect of a professional environment helps them develop confidence, industry-relevant knowledge, and employability. WBL programs could take this forward in fields such as technology, where accelerated development and nonstop innovations happen through techniques like IBM's P-TECH, where students learn and work with modern tools and live projects that match education requirements directly with actual labor needs (IBM Partners MDEC & MOE to Introduce P-TECH as Answer to Era of 'New, 2019). The same goes for health care when typically, classroom theory from preparatory seasons is usually complemented with clinical placements and residency experiences that enable students to acquire skills they will implement during qualification or later. Studies show that healthcare students who have spent the most time receiving work-based training in real clinical environments are better able to transfer and apply learning post-graduation, particularly in working with patients and in complex healthcare systems (Verhees et al., 2024).

Acquisition of knowledge through traditional education lays the groundwork for acquiring knowledge, but work-based learning enables the learner to know and actually apply the concepts to real-life situations in the workplace. Integration, therefore, offers a holistic experience to the learner, which further allows graduates to meet specific needs in the labor market based on current trends, hence becoming even more adaptive to and competitive within a fast-moving job market.

Table 3: Comparison Between Traditional Learning and Work-Based Learning (WBL) in the Healthcare Sector

Aspect	Traditional Learning	Work-Based Learning (WBL)
Skills Development	Is exploratory normative academic knowledge or academic training skills, for example, critical thinking and medical anatomy, and theory (Example: Medicine school lectures about human biology and disease pathology.)	It gives learners hands-on and practical experience that focuses on actual clinical skills, patient interaction, communication, and teamwork. (Example: clinical placements in health-care settings, such as hospitals or clinics, where students apply theoretical knowledge in patient care in a real clinical setting).

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Industry Relevance	Lack experience in direct exposure to industry with a limited practical application of all knowledge in real-world health practice. (Example: Textbook courses teaching generally medical principles with no direct contact with the environment of health care.)	This aligns precisely with the industry needs, providing practical exposure aligned with the present trends and requirements in the healthcare industry (Example: internships or residency programs at health facilities).
Employability Impact	Graduate with theoretical knowledge, while practical experience will be absent from them thus making them not ready for jobs with some clinical roles attached. (Example: Graduates with medical degrees but lacking any clinical work experience would find it difficult to move into direct patient-facing roles.)	It increases employability since it offers certain soft skills, such as teamwork, empathy, and adaptability, that make students stronger candidates vying for jobs in the health industry. (For example, healthcare internships and residencies increase hiring potential and provide more seamless transitions into healthcare jobs).

But at the same time, traditional education gives good base knowledge in the healthcare sector about medical theory and human anatomy. But it leaves out the bit-needed direct contact with the industry that students require to become full-fledged members of the healthcare workforce. Most of the time is spent in auditoriums by medical students learning about the pathology of diseases and protocols for treatment using books and theoretical course work. However, they are often not given any opportunity to practice this within a real-life clinical context until much later in their studies (Shrivastava & Shrivastava, 2024).

Work-based learning (WBL) typically, includes clinical placements, internships, or residencies which helps to fill the gap with hands-on experience in a real-world healthcare environment. These opportunities for WBL allow students to accept active patient contact, use their theories in practice, and learn how a healthcare facility day-to-day operates. In a hospital, for example, nursing students might work with healthcare teams, dispense medication, and do patient assessments for a semester to acquire practical knowledge and abilities. It's challenging to produce this kind of experience in the classroom. The greatest way to develop well-rounded health professionals who possess more than just medical knowledge but also practical skills for career success is to combine traditional education with work-based learning (WBL) (Hindriati et al., 2025).

Conclusion and Recommendation

In summary, work-based learning (WBL) and internships are crucial resources for closing the knowledge gap between the academic and professional worlds. By giving students, the chance to put their theoretical knowledge to use in real-world situations, these programs improve their employability by giving them real-world skills that employers greatly appreciate, like communication, cooperation, and problem-solving. Additionally, WBL promotes networking opportunities that may result in future job openings or professional partnerships.

First developed and structured but work in such a manner that they are much more strategic in utilizing the potential of these programs. The universities must come out with a proper

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framework and intentionally set up internship systems and employers must think that holding these interns is an investment for the future workforce. The other major player in expanding WBL has been the government, which offers various kinds of financial incentives to help SME participation. In the future, as the workforce changes continuously, thus should be an adaptation of vocational education using WBL to meet the continuous metamorphoses in industries. They should not only help youth get their foot into the door for that first job but also give them the skills and attitudes that will allow them to succeed in careers over the long run, making them more flexible and skillful in meeting the future demands of the job market.

Improving the employability of graduates in Malaysia requires a stronger connection between education and industry. Industry-specific internships, such as those in manufacturing, technology, and healthcare, can meet the demands of educational institutions. Examples include internships in medical research, hospital administration, and patient care that give students hands-on experience in the healthcare industry. While the technology sector should provide internships on hands-on coding, software development, and digital project management, all these areas are currently in high demand in the job market.

A key strategy will be adding more impetus to make WBL acceptable to most SMEs with financial incentives such as tax exemptions, grants, and subsidies. Many SMEs refrain from offering internships due to cost, and such incentives would address these concerns, thereby pushing these companies to participate more in the skills development process. Malaysia would set up funding schemes like other countries' initiatives, for instance, Singapore's "Skills Future" program, to support SMEs in creating paid internships.

In addition, universities must develop a central online application platform where students can search for internships with job-matching systems connecting them with potential employers within their field of interest. Such platforms must be complemented by a comprehensive career services department where students would find help in building resumes, coaching, and preparing for interviews. So that students acquire hard skills and soft skills, making them better tools in the job market. Finally, just as important is to design internships in university systems with actual industry partners to provide those opportunities for real learning experiences together with mentorship that ensures even deeper courses of the chosen curriculum. This approach will ensure that students gain relevant experience as well as acquire the skills employers are looking for. It builds better connections of education to employment whereby graduates get better prepared to enter the job market, learning how to make a living out of it.

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