



Research Article

**MANAGEMENT OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN VOCATIONAL AND TECHNICAL
EDUCATION: ACADEMIC AND STUDENT PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract

This study examines experiential learning management in vocational and technical education, with a specific focus on tourism education. Given the sector's dynamic nature, students must integrate theoretical knowledge with practical applications to enhance their professional skills and employability. Based on the Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), this research examines how internship programs contribute to students' career development, skill acquisition, and industry adaptation. Findings indicate that internships are crucial in equipping students with essential competencies, including communication, problem-solving, crisis management, and customer relations. Additionally, structured internship programs provide students with real-world insights that influence their career decisions and professional aspirations. The study emphasizes the need for better alignment between academic curricula and industry demands. Recommendations include integrating digital tools and industry-specific software into coursework, enhancing personal and professional skill development, and incorporating topics such as sustainable tourism and cultural awareness. Additionally, ensuring strong academic mentorship and structured internship frameworks will enhance students' practical learning experiences and their sectoral adaptation. Ultimately, experiential learning is not just an academic requirement but a fundamental component of professional growth in tourism education. By strengthening practical applications within the curriculum, students can better navigate industry challenges and develop the skills necessary for a successful career in the tourism sector.

Keywords: Experiential Learning, Vocational Education, Tourism Education, Internship Programs, Career Development

Introduction

Vocational education in the tourism sector in Türkiye was initially delivered through short-term courses and in-service training. However, alongside industry developments, it has gradually become institutionalized at the secondary and higher education levels. In line with sectoral needs, tourism vocational high schools at the secondary level, vocational colleges offering associate degrees, and faculties/colleges at the undergraduate level have been established. While vocational high schools aim to supply the sector with a qualified workforce, vocational colleges focus on meeting the need for intermediate staff and mid-level managers. The demand for educators and senior managers is met by faculties and colleges specialized in tourism (Akoğlan Kozak, 2009).

In the tourism sector, individuals receiving vocational education must understand the profession's requirements and acquire the skills needed to meet them before entering the labour market. This process cannot be limited to the accumulation of theoretical knowledge; it also requires applying this knowledge in real industry conditions (Aslan, Çoban, and Çokal, 2014). Due to its nature, tourism is a field in which both practical skills and theoretical knowledge are indispensable. In this context, Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) provides a valuable lens for understanding how students develop professional competence through direct experience (Kolb, 1984). Experiential learning is based on reinforcing knowledge through practice rather than acquiring it solely at a theoretical level, which makes this approach particularly critical in practice-based disciplines such as tourism education (Gibbons and Hopkins, 1980).

Tourism education institutions, therefore, integrate applied education processes into their curricula to ensure that students acquire the professional skills demanded by the sector. Internship programs, one of the most common and effective forms of applied education, allow students to engage in experiential learning through

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direct contact with the industry (Dewey, 1938). According to Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Model, individuals learn by actively experiencing, observing, reflecting on, and evaluating these processes. When applied education is effectively structured in tourism programs, it can strengthen students' professional skills and increase their employability (Airey and Tribe, 2000; Baum, 2006).

From this perspective, applied education processes need to be systematically designed not only to enhance employability but also to facilitate graduates' adaptation to the industry. Internship programs enable students to apply theoretical knowledge in practice, understand the sector's dynamics, and establish professional networks (Kolb and Kolb, 2017). It is therefore recommended that educational administrators develop more systematic, pedagogically grounded internship programs, make improvements based on student satisfaction, and strengthen cooperation with industry stakeholders (Boud, Cohen, and Walker, 1993).

Building on this background, the present study examines applied education processes in the tourism sector within the framework of ELT. Specifically, it focuses on the effects of these processes on students' professional skill acquisition, employability, and career development. In line with ELT, internship programs, and other applied training methods, these programs are conceptualized as key mechanisms that enable students to translate theoretical knowledge into practice, shape their career goals, and build their professional futures. Accordingly, the study argues that applied learning processes in tourism education should be regarded as an academic requirement and a critical component of professional formation. Education models designed within the ELT framework are expected to contribute to the training of a more qualified workforce in the sector by enhancing the professional development of tourism students and their adaptation to the industry.

Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, which conceptualizes learning as a cyclical, four-stage process. The cycle begins with concrete experience, where individuals encounter a new situation or re-encounter a familiar one in a different context; continues with reflective observation, in which they critically reflect on this experience; progresses to abstract conceptualization, where experiences are interpreted and organized through concepts and theories; and culminates in active experimentation, where individuals apply what they have learned in new situations (Kolb, 1984). This cyclical model emphasizes the transformation of experience into knowledge and the dynamic interplay between action and reflection (Quaye, Kissi and Hagan, 2025).

In tourism education, this framework is particularly salient because the development of competent professionals depends heavily on practice-based learning and direct engagement with real industry settings. The dynamic and complex nature of the tourism and hospitality sector requires graduates who possess not only theoretical knowledge but also context-specific skills, adaptive capacities, and professional attitudes that traditional, classroom-based pedagogies often struggle to cultivate (Quaye et al., 2025). In this regard, internship programs and other applied training opportunities embedded in tourism curricula are key mechanisms for operationalizing experiential learning, enabling students to test and refine their knowledge in authentic work environments (Sihombing, 2021; Zopiatis et al., 2021; Quintela et al., 2024).

Within this perspective, internships provide a structured context in which all four stages of Kolb's learning cycle can naturally unfold. For example, a student working in a hotel front office gains concrete experience through direct interaction with guests, practices check-in procedures, and addresses service issues. Through reflective observation, students review critical incidents and evaluate what went well and what did not. These reflections are then linked to abstract conceptualization as the student interprets experiences in light of theories related to service quality, guest satisfaction, or complaint management. Finally, active experimentation occurs when the student applies revised strategies in subsequent interactions, thereby generating new experiences and continuing the learning cycle (Chen and Shen, 2012; Boud et al., 2013). In this way, internships function as laboratories where theory and practice intersect, strengthening students' professional competence and confidence.

A central outcome of this process is the acquisition of professional skills. Through applied education, students gain firsthand familiarity with core operational functions in hospitality and tourism organizations, including front office, food and beverage, housekeeping, human resources, accounting, ticketing, and reservations. These settings require them to employ communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and crisis management skills in real time (Chen and Shen, 2012; Balyalı and Aktaş, 2023). Empirical studies indicate that such practice-based learning helps students move beyond abstract, textbook knowledge and develop a nuanced understanding of service processes, customer expectations, and organizational routines (Gül and Altıntaş, 2018; Yedla and

Ajoon, 2022). Field-based components such as internships and site visits also foster critical reflection and self-regulation, which are essential for higher-order learning and professional maturity in a service-intensive industry (Quaye et al., 2025).

Experiential learning in tourism education is also closely linked to employability and competitive advantage in the labor market. By allowing students to gain real-world experience before graduation, internships enhance their readiness for employment and signal to employers that they can adapt to workplace demands from the outset (Ganguli, 2019). Research shows that tourism graduates with internship experience enjoy a relative advantage during recruitment processes when compared to those without such experience, as they can demonstrate both sector-specific skills and familiarity with organizational cultures (Aymankuy and Aymankuy, 2013; Sincharoenkul and Witthayasirikul, 2022). Practical training additionally facilitates the development of professional networks, often leading to job offers in the same establishments where students completed their internships (Sincharoenkul and Witthayasirikul, 2022; Xu et al., 2022). This mutually beneficial relationship between educational institutions and employers strengthens the talent pipeline, contributing to a more skilled and adaptable workforce in the tourism sector (Shehawy, 2017).

Another important dimension of this framework concerns the impact of experiential learning on students' career planning. Internships often serve as pivotal moments in tourism students' perceptions of the sector and their long-term career aspirations. Studies indicate that, while students with no internship experience may initially hold idealized views of the industry, those who have completed internships develop more realistic, nuanced perspectives on working conditions, career progression, and occupational challenges (Aymankuy and Aymankuy, 2013; Sezerel and Cankül, 2019). In terms of Kolb's model, this corresponds to the reflective observation stage, where students critically reassess their expectations and align them with their lived experiences. Through this process, they make more informed and sustainable career decisions, either reaffirming their commitment to the sector or redirecting their aspirations within or beyond tourism (Appietu, Asaimah and Mensah, 2019). Experiential learning also exposes students to different departments and roles, enabling them to identify specific areas of interest and perceived person-job fit, which in turn has positive effects on job satisfaction and retention after graduation (Farmaki, 2018; Le, Klieve, and McDonald, 2018; Giousmpasoglou and Marinakou, 2021).

However, the potential benefits of experiential learning do not materialize automatically; they depend mainly on how internship programs and applied education processes are designed and managed. Educational administrators play a critical role in building strong bridges between academic curricula and sectoral practice (Akoğlan Kozak, 2009). Effective internship frameworks typically include alignment between curriculum content and industry needs, systematic academic advising during the internship, structured cooperation between employers and institutions, and continuous improvement mechanisms based on student feedback (Abdullah et al., 2015; Ko, 2021). When these elements are neglected, internships may lead to negative experiences, such as students feeling underutilized, exploited as cheap labor, or excluded from meaningful learning opportunities, which, in turn, can generate unfavorable attitudes toward the industry (Dario and Snežana, 2017; Gül and Altıntaş, 2018).

Given these risks, student satisfaction emerges as a key indicator of the quality and effectiveness of applied education. Regular evaluation practices—such as post-internship surveys, reflective reports, and debriefing sessions—help identify students' expectations, perceived challenges, and areas for improvement (Pelit et al., 2016; Eker, 2024). Studies highlight the importance of factors such as supervisory support, workplace climate, and perceived future employment opportunities in shaping overall satisfaction with internship experiences (Dario and Snežana, 2017; Lingadkar and Sankaranarayanan, 2023). Transparent communication about internship objectives and potential difficulties prior to placement can further mitigate dissatisfaction and foster realistic expectations about the nature of hospitality work (Marinakou, 2013; Ko, 2021). Positive internship experiences, characterized by adequate guidance, structured learning tasks, and opportunities for responsibility, are associated with stronger motivation to remain in the sector and pursue long-term careers in tourism (Appietu et al., 2019; Giousmpasoglou and Marinakou, 2021).qu

Ultimately, the literature emphasizes the importance of robust collaboration between universities and tourism businesses in maximizing the educational value of internships. Sectoral partnerships, including joint projects, industry-led seminars, and co-developed curricula, enable academic programs to stay aligned with current industry expectations and technological developments (Raybould and Wilkins, 2005; Le et al., 2018). A tripartite collaboration model, which brings together students, educational institutions, and organizations, is particularly effective in creating coherent internship experiences with clearly defined roles and responsibilities

(Cho, 2006). Faculty mentoring, systematic performance assessment, and ongoing communication between academic and workplace supervisors further support the integration of theoretical learning with practical skill development (Qu et al., 2021). Universities can strengthen these processes by investing in pre-placement preparation, appointing staff with sectoral experience to coordinate internship activities, and institutionalizing mechanisms for regular dialogue with industry stakeholders (Hou, 2018; Doña, 2020).

Based on this conceptual framework, the present study examines applied education processes in the tourism sector through the lens of ELT, focusing on their impact on students' professional skill acquisition, employability, and career development. By analyzing the experiences and perceptions of both students and internship coordinator academics, the study views internship programs and other applied training methods as critical arenas where Kolb's experiential learning cycle is enacted. In line with the literature, the study conceptualizes applied learning processes in tourism education not merely as complementary activities but as an academic requirement and a key mechanism for constructing students' professional futures. Accordingly, education models designed with experiential learning principles are expected to enhance tourism students' professional development and sectoral adaptation, thereby contributing to a more qualified and competitive workforce in the tourism sector.

Methodology

Qualitative research enables in-depth exploration of individuals' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations (Creswell, 2013). In this study, a qualitative design was used to examine experiential learning processes from the perspectives of both academics and students. Semi-structured interviews, a common qualitative research technique, were preferred because they allow participants to express their views in detail while still following a flexible, predesigned framework (Patton, 2015; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). In this context, interviews with the participants provided rich data on how experiential learning is implemented and perceived. *Ethics committee approval for this study was obtained from the Dokuz Eylül University Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (Decision No. 24, dated March 19, 2025).*

Participants

This research adopted a qualitative approach to evaluate the impact of applied education processes in the tourism sector on students' professional skill acquisition, employability, and career development. The study group comprised 15 associate degree students in tourism and hotel management, undergraduate students who had completed their internships, and 15 academics serving as internship coordinators. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants (Patton, 2002) and including students who had completed their internships enabled the collection of in-depth information about applied educational experiences (Creswell, 2012), while internship coordinator academics, who manage educational processes and guide students through their industry connections, are key informants for evaluating the effectiveness of applied education (Airey and Tribe, 2000). Studies emphasizing the importance of experiential learning in tourism education (Baum, 2006; Solnet, Robinson and Cooper, 2007) suggest that sector-based experiences during the preparation phase are critical for students' employability. In this context, combining student and academic perspectives expands the research scope by offering diverse views on applied education processes.

Demographically, the student participants ranged in age from 19 to 26 years. Eight had previous paid work experience in the tourism sector, in addition to their compulsory internship, whereas seven were engaging with the sector for the first time during their internship. This distinction is important, as prior sector experience may influence students' willingness to intern and their evaluation of internship conditions and challenges. In classroom and focus group settings, students with prior work experience were observed to enrich discussions with concrete sector examples. However, their strong views can sometimes shape the perceptions of less experienced peers. The academic participants were between 33 and 52 years old, with 4 to 18 years of employment at their current institutions, representing different career stages and varying levels of professional sector experience. Eight of the academics had industry experience, while seven did not; eight worked in the Tourism and Hotel Management Program, and seven worked in the Tourism Management Department. Among the students, eight were female, and seven were male; seven were associate degree students in Tourism and Hotel Management, and eight were undergraduate students in Tourism Management. Twelve students completed their internships in hotels, and three in travel agencies, working in various departments, including guest relations, front office, human resources, accounting, food and beverage, housekeeping, ticketing, and reservations. Detailed profiles of academics are presented in Table 1, and profiles of students are presented in Table 2. Students with prior sectoral experience actively participated in coursework and focus groups; their views were included in the analysis, as their professional backgrounds sometimes provided additional benefits

(e.g., concrete sector examples) but could also create different expectations or prejudices compared to students without prior experience.

Table 1. Profiles of Academicians

	Sector Experience	Age	Internship Coordination Duration	Seniority	Department
A1	Yes	38	3	8	Tourism and Hotel Mng.
A2	Yes	35	1	4	Tourism and Hotel Mng.
A3	No	41	3	7	Tourism and Hotel Mng.
A4	Yes	45	5	13	Tourism and Hotel Mng.
A5	No	39	5	16	Tourism and Hotel Mng.
A6	No	34	2	18	Tourism Management
A7	Yes	47	6	9	Tourism and Hotel Mng.
A8	Yes	50	7	14	Tourism Management
A9	No	52	9	5	Tourism Management
A10	Yes	37	3	7	Tourism and Hotel Mng.
A11	Yes	44	6	11	Tourism Management
A12	No	33	1	8	Tourism Management
A13	No	36	2	12	Tourism and Hotel Mng.
A14	Yes	42	4	10	Tourism Management
A15	No	40	2	6	Tourism Management

Table 2. Profiles of Students

	Gender	Grade	Department	Sector Type	Internship Duration	Internship Scope	Work Experience
S1	Female	2nd Grade	Tourism and Hotel Mng.	Hotel	40 days	Guest Relations	No
S2	Male	Graduate	Tourism Management	Hotel	40 days	Front Desk	Yes
S3	Male	2nd Grade	Tourism and Hotel Mng.	Agency	40 days	Reservations	No
S4	Female	4th Grade	Tourism Management	Hotel	40 days	Human Resources	Yes
S5	Male	2nd Grade	Tourism and Hotel Mng.	Agency	40 days	Ticketing	No
S6	Female	Graduate	Tourism Management	Hotel	40 days	Accounting	Yes
S7	Female	2nd Grade	Tourism and Hotel Mng.	Hotel	40 days	Food and Beverage	No
S8	Male	4th Grade	Tourism Management	Hotel	40 days	Front Desk	Yes
S9	Male	2nd Grade	Tourism and Hotel Mng.	Hotel	40 days	Housekeeping	No
S10	Female	2nd Grade	Tourism and Hotel Mng.	Hotel	40 days	Food and Beverage	Yes
S11	Female	4th Grade	Tourism Management	Hotel	40 days	Front Desk	No
S12	Male	Graduate	Tourism Management	Hotel	40 days	Front Desk	Yes
S13	Female	Graduate	Tourism Management	Hotel	40 days	Food and Beverage	Yes
S14	Male	2nd Grade	Tourism and Hotel Mng.	Agency	40 days	Ticketing	No
S15	Female	4th Grade	Tourism Management	Hotel	40 days	Food and Beverage	Yes

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured focus group interviews, an effective qualitative method that allows participants to share experiences interactively and reveals differing viewpoints (Morgan, 1997). In focus groups, participant interaction and moderator guidance are central, enabling individuals to respond to and build on each other’s views while also expressing their own perspectives (Krueger and Casey, 2015). In this study, semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with students enrolled in tourism and hospitality programs in Türkiye. Each focus group included approximately five participants and lasted 60-90 minutes. The interviews were held online via Zoom in April 2025 and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Focus group interviews are widely used in educational research because they offer a structured yet interactive environment for participants to articulate their thoughts (Krueger and Casey, 2015).

The interview questions were prepared based on Kolb’s (1984) Experiential Learning Theory, which conceptualizes learning as a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Accordingly, the questions focused on: (1) the real work experiences students encountered during internships, (2) how they evaluated these experiences retrospectively, (3) how they anticipated using the skills they acquired in the future, and (4) how they planned to develop the gains from their internships further.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using descriptive and content analysis techniques. Descriptive analysis was employed to organize the data according to predefined themes and to present participant views directly (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Within this framework, categories such as professional skill development, sectoral adaptation, and career expectations were used to demonstrate the impact of internship experiences on student outcomes. Content analysis enabled a deeper evaluation by identifying recurring themes, patterns, and concepts in participants' statements (Bowen, 2009). During this process, clear coding was conducted, categories were created, and similarities and differences among participant views were identified (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). To enhance reliability and validity, two researchers conducted independent coding, and inter-coder agreement was calculated (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Member checking and external audit procedures were also implemented. For member checking, the preliminary findings were shared with five participants, and their feedback was used to confirm and refine the results. For the external audit, the study was reviewed by an expert who was not involved in the research to assess whether the data supported the findings, interpretations, and conclusions (Creswell, 2013). Direct quotations were included to strengthen the credibility of the findings, with participant codes (A1, A2...; S1, S2...) indicating the source of each quotation.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach, which includes six phases: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. NVivo software was used to code and categorize the data systematically. Two independent researchers coded a subset of the interviews to ensure inter-coder reliability, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Final themes were identified based on recurring patterns and theoretical relevance.

Findings

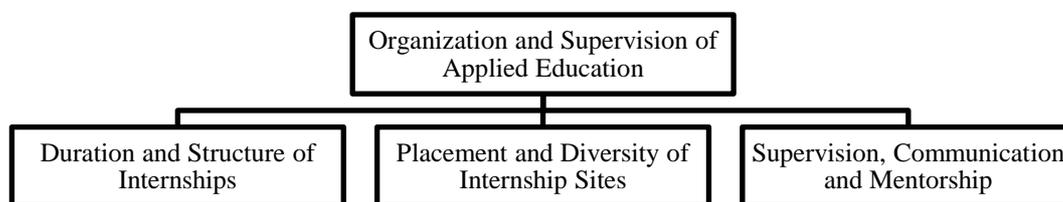
After analyzing the research data, the findings are presented under headings that reflect the views of both academics and students. These headings categorize main themes and their corresponding sub-themes.

Academic Perspectives

Organization and Supervision of Applied Education

When academics were asked about the elements they consider in planning and supervising applied education, their responses highlighted the centrality of internship duration, the diversity and relevance of placement sites, and the collaborative nature of supervision between universities and businesses. Overall, they conceptualized planning and supervision as interconnected processes that determine whether internships become meaningful learning experiences rather than merely routine work. The main theme of the organization and supervision of applied education, along with its sub-themes, is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Organization and Supervision of Applied Education



Academics describe planning and supervision as interconnected pillars that shape the quality of the internship experience. They emphasize that the duration should be long enough for students to adapt to the workplace and internalize routines, often citing a minimum of six weeks as necessary for this process to occur. Extended periods are considered beneficial, provided academic responsibilities are not undermined. As one participant stated, “*Internships shorter than six weeks are insufficient for students to adapt to the sector and understand business processes*” (A1). Another academic added, “*Internships longer than three months can be very productive if we protect students’ academic responsibilities at the same time*” (A2).

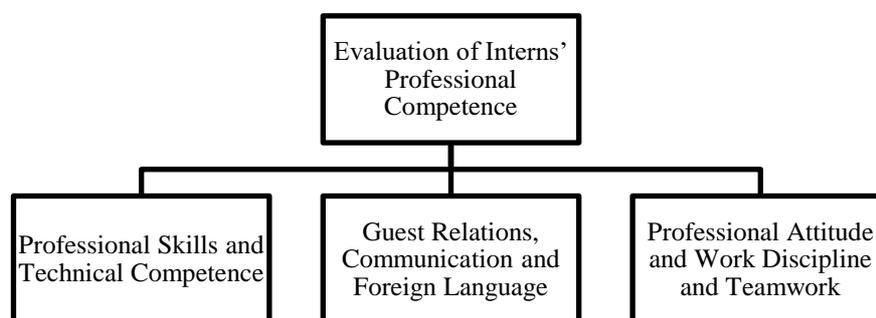
A second organizational concern is the selection and diversification of internship sites. Participants argue that placements should not be restricted to a narrow group of hotels. However, they should also include airlines, travel agencies, and food and beverage enterprises so that students experience different segments of the tourism sector. They insist that placements should align with students' interests and career goals rather than be assigned randomly. One academic explained, *"We try to place students in businesses that match their interests and plans instead of sending them to any available hotel"* (A3). Another highlighted, *"Providing internships in various subfields of tourism broadens students' perspectives and prepares them for different career paths"* (A4).

Supervision is viewed as a continuous process that requires close collaboration between universities and businesses. Academics describe practices such as regular communication with employers, on-site visits, and the use of employer evaluations together with student reports. *"We keep in touch with employers and visit the workplace during the internship to see the conditions on site,"* one coordinator noted (A5). Through these mechanisms, they aim to prevent interns from being reduced to cheap labor or assigned to routine tasks. At the same time, they recognize constraints: *"Due to heavy workload, experienced staff cannot always allocate enough time to mentor students,"* an academic observed (A6). This situation weakens the educational character of internships and leads participants to call for more structured supervision frameworks. As one participant summarized, *"Internships should be treated like a course, with clear learning outcomes, assessment tools, and defined mentoring responsibilities"* (A7).

Evaluation of Interns' Professional Competence

When academics were asked about the criteria they consider in evaluating interns' professional competence, their responses clustered around several interrelated dimensions encompassing knowledge, skills, and professional behaviours. In particular, they emphasized professional skills, guest relations, and foreign language proficiency, as well as professional attitude, work discipline, and teamwork, as key indicators of readiness for the tourism sector. The main theme of evaluating interns' professional competence, along with its sub-themes, is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Evaluation of Interns' Professional Competence



Academics generally assess interns through multiple, interrelated dimensions, starting with professional skill competency. They pay particular attention to how students apply theoretical knowledge in practice, adhere to hygiene and safety rules, and utilize sector-specific software and automation systems. One academic remarked, *"For us, the key question is how the student applies theoretical knowledge in the field, whether in the kitchen or at the front office"* (A8). Another emphasized the importance of digital tools: *"Knowing hotel software and reservation systems gives students a clear advantage in the labor market"* (A9).

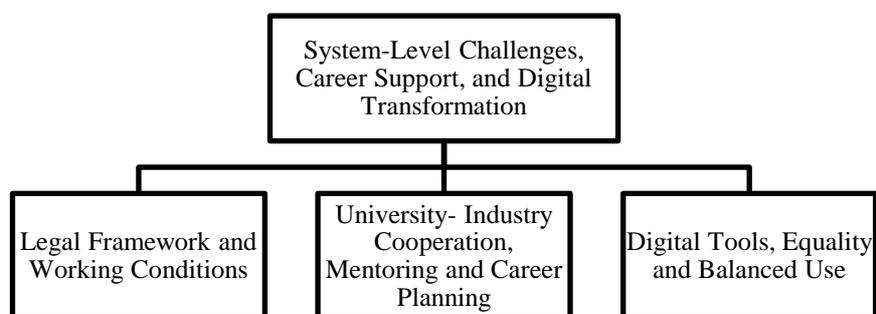
Guest relations, communication skills, and foreign language proficiency are considered essential to employability in the tourism industry. Academics expect students to communicate clearly and politely with guests, manage complaints constructively, and demonstrate cultural awareness in multicultural environments. However, they observe that some students struggle with face-to-face communication and with using professional language. As one participant explained, *"Some students behave shyly or cannot choose the right words when interacting with customers, which directly affects guest satisfaction"* (A10). Limited foreign language skills further complicate this picture: *"Students who cannot use professional terminology in a foreign language have difficulty communicating with international guests,"* an academic noted (A11). For this reason, several participants argue that pre-internship preparation should focus not only on technical knowledge but also on communication skills, professional terminology, and intercultural sensitivity.

Professional attitude, work discipline, and teamwork are described as the behavioral foundations of professional competence. Punctuality, responsibility, adherence to dress codes, and personal grooming standards are seen as visible indicators of professionalism. *“Time management and reliability are critical in tourism; an intern who is frequently late or careless creates serious problems,”* one academic stressed (A12). At the same time, participants evaluate how students integrate into teams, share responsibilities, and cope with stress during busy periods. Another academic commented, *“We observe whether the student fits into the team, supports colleagues, and remains calm under pressure”* (A13). Some students are reported to struggle with heavy workloads or conflicts with colleagues and managers, which leads academics to recommend that conflict management, stress management, and team communication be explicitly included in both the curriculum and the internship evaluation criteria.

System-Level Challenges, Career Support, and Digital Transformation

In examining broader factors that shape the internship experience, academics identified a range of system-level challenges, as well as mechanisms that could support students’ career planning and benefit from digital innovations. Their responses addressed concerns about the legal framework and working conditions, the role of university-industry cooperation and mentoring in facilitating the transition to employment, as well as the opportunities and inequalities associated with the use of digital tools in applied education. The main themes of system-level challenges, career support, and digital transformation, along with their sub-themes, are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3. System-Level Challenges, Career Support and Digital Transformation



This theme brings together system-level challenges, the contribution of practical education to career planning and employment, and the role of digital tools in these areas. At the macro level, academics highlight legal uncertainties and uneven working conditions as significant issues. They note that students often start internships without clear information about their insurance, working hours, or leave rights, and that some businesses do not fully comply with legal obligations. One participant stated, *“Many students do not know their rights before they start; they are unsure about insurance or overtime, and this creates tensions later”* (A14). Another reported, *“There are still businesses that use interns as cheap labor and do not complete their insurance procedures properly”* (A15). In their view, stronger legal regulation and more effective inspection are needed to protect interns and standardize minimum conditions across the sector.

Academics also emphasize the importance of structured university-industry cooperation and professional networks for career planning. They argue that internships should be embedded in broader collaboration frameworks that include sector-based curriculum updates, joint projects, and networking events such as fairs, conferences, and seminars. One academic suggested, *“We need stronger bridges between universities and businesses so that internships are designed according to sector needs and can more easily turn into employment opportunities”* (A2). Mentor-supported programs, in which alums and industry professionals guide students, are considered particularly valuable. As a participant noted, *“When experienced professionals and alumni mentor students, they help them understand the realities of the sector and plan their careers more realistically”* (A4).

Digital tools, including AR, VR, MR, 360-degree simulations, and Metaverse-based environments, are viewed as both an opportunity and a source of new inequalities. On the one hand, academics believe that realistic simulations of hotel operations, guest relations, and crisis scenarios can enrich experiential learning, reduce training costs, and overcome the limitations of time and space. *“Scenario-based VR applications allow students to experience crises in a safe environment before entering the sector,”* an academic explained (A8). On the other hand, participants warn that excessive reliance on virtual environments may weaken face-to-face

interaction, empathy, and communication skills, and that limited access to technological infrastructure can create new forms of exclusion. One participant underlined, “*Not all students have access to the necessary technological infrastructure, and this can deepen inequalities between institutions and individuals*” (A9). Consequently, academics advocate for a balanced model that combines robust legal and policy frameworks, structured university-industry partnerships, career-oriented mentoring, and the pedagogically grounded use of digital tools, thereby enabling practical education to both safeguard student rights and adapt to the evolving technological landscape of the tourism sector.

To provide an integrated overview of the academic perspectives on applied education, the main themes and sub-themes derived from the interviews were synthesized into a summary Table 3. For each theme, the table highlights the core focus of academics’ views and the key implications for the design and implementation of internship practices. In this way, the table provides a concise overview of how academics conceptualize the organization and supervision of applied education, the evaluation of interns’ professional competence, and the broader system-level challenges, career support mechanisms, and digital transformations that shape the internship experience.

Table 3. Overview of Main Themes and Sub-Themes From Internship Coordinators’ Perspectives

Main theme	Sub-theme	Focus of academics’ views	Key implications for applied education
Organization and Supervision of Applied Education	Duration and structure of internships	Appropriate length and structure of internships (minimum six weeks; more extended periods if academic duties are protected).	Internships should be long enough for adaptation and meaningful learning, while maintaining students’ academic progress.
	Placement and diversity of internship sites	Variety and relevance of placement sites (hotels, airlines, agencies, F&B, etc.) aligned with students’ interests.	Placements should be diversified and matched to students’ career goals rather than assigned randomly.
	Supervision, communication, and mentorship	Continuous supervision via university-industry collaboration, visits, evaluations, and mentoring.	Internships should be treated like courses, with clear outcomes and defined mentoring roles to avoid interns being treated as cheap labor.
Evaluation of Interns’ Professional Competence	Professional skills and technical competence	Application of theoretical knowledge, adherence to hygiene/safety, and use of sectoral software and systems.	Assessment tools should measure students’ ability to apply theory to practice and utilize digital tools effectively.
	Guest relations, communication, and foreign language	Quality of guest interaction, complaint management, cultural awareness, and proficiency in foreign languages.	Pre-internship preparation should include developing communication skills, proficiency in professional terminology, and intercultural sensitivity.
	Professional attitude, work discipline, and teamwork	Punctuality, responsibility, appearance, stress management, and integration into teams.	Evaluation should include behavioral and relational indicators (time management, teamwork, conflict resolution, and stress management).
System-Level Challenges, Career Support, and Digital Transformation	Legal framework and working conditions	Legal uncertainties, insurance, working hours, and misuse of interns as cheap labor.	Stronger regulation and inspection are necessary to protect interns’ rights and establish minimum standards.
	University-industry cooperation, mentoring, and career support	Cooperation structures, curriculum updates, networking events, and mentor-supported programs.	Internships should be embedded in broader collaboration and mentoring frameworks that support transition to employment.
	Digital tools, equity, and balanced use	Use of AR/VR/MR, simulations, and Metaverse; opportunities vs. new	Digital tools should be used in a pedagogically grounded and equitable way, complementing

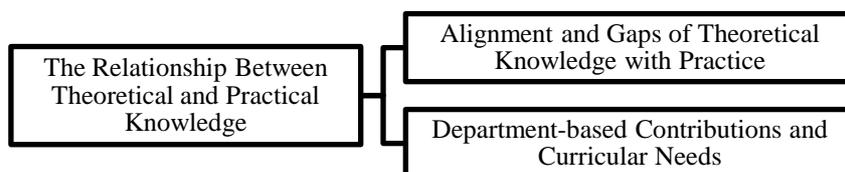
inequalities and loss of face-to-face interaction.	(not replacing) direct human interaction.
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Student Perspectives

The Relationship Between Theoretical and Practical Knowledge

When students who had completed their internships were asked how they related the training they received during their internship to the theoretical knowledge gained in the classroom, the main theme identified was *The Relationship Between Theoretical and Practical Knowledge*. Within this theme, the sub-themes include the alignment and deficiencies of theoretical knowledge with practice, department-based contributions, and curricular needs. The main theme and its sub-themes are presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4. The Relationship Between Theoretical and Practical Knowledge



The first sub-theme addresses the alignment and gaps between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Students in tourism and hospitality programs often reported that course content did not fully align with workplace realities, and that theoretical knowledge needed to be adapted to the dynamic, unpredictable nature of service environments. As S1 noted, *“The theoretical knowledge we learned in class does not always align with what we encounter in the field. For example, the customer relations strategies we learned in class are not applied the same way in the hotel. More flexible and quicker decisions need to be made in real life.”* Similarly, students noted that digital reservation systems and other software were only partially covered in their courses. S3 explained, *“I found the information we learned in reservation systems and front office management courses beneficial during my internship. However, I believe more industry-wide automation programs should be included in the courses.”*

The second sub-theme focuses on department-based course contributions and curricular needs. Students’ evaluations of theory-practice links vary by department. Front office interns emphasized that customer relations courses were practical but that more emphasis on stress management was needed: *“The customer relations techniques I learned in the hospitality management course helped, but there should be more content on stress management because we sometimes experience very challenging moments with guests”* (S9). *“Those working in travel agencies found tour planning and destination management courses helpful but felt underprepared for crisis management in group tours”* (S13). In the kitchen and food and beverage departments, students emphasized the importance of time management, team coordination, hygiene, and kitchen management. As S6 reflected, *“While hygiene and kitchen management are covered in gastronomy and food and beverage management courses, I realized how important time management and team coordination are when working in the kitchen. These topics should be covered more in the courses.”*

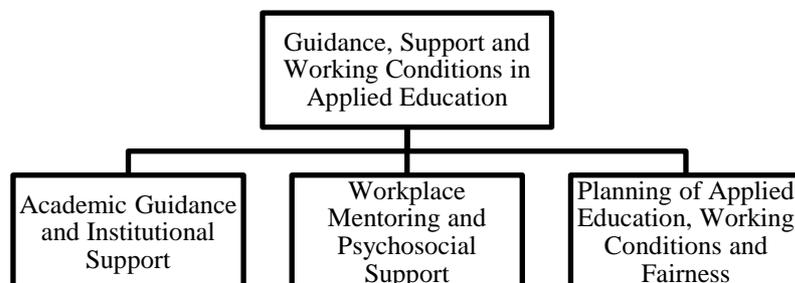
Based on these experiences, students proposed adding new courses and content on conflict and complaint management, guest experience management, and sustainable tourism practices. For example, S7 suggested, *“There should be a course on ‘Complaint Management and Conflict Resolution’ in the curriculum.”* At the same time, S5 advocated for a course on guest experience management, and S15 proposed more systematic coverage of environmentally friendly practices and green certifications. Overall, students’ views indicate a need to update curricula to align with sectoral expectations and to integrate workplace skills, such as time management, stress management, and sustainability, more explicitly into theoretical education.

Guidance, Support, and Working Conditions in Applied Education

Students were also asked about the adequacy of the guidance and support provided by educational institutions, their evaluations of applied education processes, and their suggestions for improvement. Their responses clustered around a second theme, *Guidance, Support, and Working Conditions in Applied Education*, which

includes sub-themes on academic guidance and institutional support, workplace mentoring and psychosocial support, and the planning of applied education in relation to working conditions and fairness. These main themes and sub-themes are presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Guidance, Support and Working Conditions in Applied Education



The first sub-theme relates to academic guidance and institutional support. Many students reported difficulties in accessing their academic advisors during the internship and perceived the guidance system as fragmented. As S3 stated, *“We had difficulty reaching our academic advisor during the internship process. We had a few options to communicate our issues outside of official channels.”* Others called for a more structured system: *“Some of our professors were supportive, but overall, I think the guidance system should be more structured”* (S6). These views suggest that students expect clearer procedures and more proactive support, particularly regarding internship applications and problem-solving during the placement.

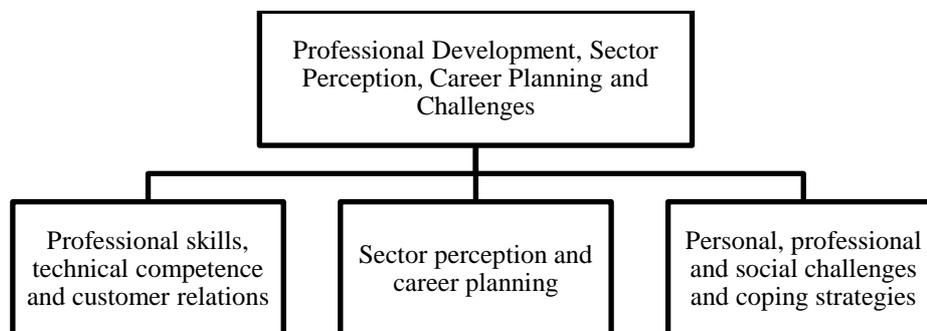
The second sub-theme concerns workplace mentoring and psychosocial support. Students emphasized that the presence or absence of a designated mentor in the workplace significantly shaped their learning experience. In some businesses, there was no clear mentor: *“There was no assigned mentor at the place we interned. Most of the time, we had to figure out what to do on our own”* (S9). In others, supervisors played an active role in guiding interns: *“Our supervisor at the workplace was very involved, provided us with important information about the sector, and contributed to our development”* (S12). At the same time, several students noted that long working hours and high workloads harmed their motivation, and that the available psychological and social support mechanisms were limited. As S14 observed, *“The internship process was difficult for some of my friends, especially because of the long working hours; our motivation dropped, but we could not get any support from the school in this regard.”*

A third sub-theme concerns the planning of applied education in relation to working conditions and fairness. Students reported that internship programs were not always systematic and that they were often assigned routine tasks rather than responsibilities that would promote professional growth. *“We were expected to use what we learned in the field, but most of the time, due to the workload, we were asked to do routine tasks only”* (S2). Others highlighted issues around unpaid internships and the perception of interns as cheap labor: *“We did not get paid for the internship, but we took on the same responsibilities as full-time employees. This is unfair”* (S10). These accounts underline the need to redesign internship programs so that students are given meaningful tasks, working hours are monitored, and fair compensation and transparent placement procedures are ensured.

Professional Development, Sector Perception, Career Planning, and Challenges

Finally, students were asked about the professional skills they developed during the internship, how they applied these skills in practical experience, how the applied education affected their perception of the sector, and how the internship influenced their career planning and motivation. Their responses formed a third theme, *“Professional Development, Sector Perception, Career Planning and Challenges,”* which includes sub-themes on professional skills and customer relations, sector perception and career planning, and personal, professional, and social challenges and coping strategies. The main theme and its sub-themes are presented in Figure 6.

Figure 6. Professional Development, Sector Perception, Career Planning and Challenges



The first sub-theme focuses on professional skills and customer relations. Students emphasized that internships provided substantial opportunities to develop communication skills, problem-solving abilities, and technical competencies. S5 explained, *“While working in the front desk department, I realized how important my communication skills were. My biggest achievements were effectively communicating with customers, being patient, and gaining problem-solving abilities.”* Others developed technical and digital skills in specific departments, such as kitchen operations or reservations. As S6 noted, *“I did my internship in the kitchen, and here I learned kitchen hygiene rules, food safety, and how to serve quickly.”* At the same time, S15 highlighted the learning of using hotel automation systems as a significant advantage for future employment. In addition, internships were seen as crucial for foreign language development and cultural awareness, especially in multicultural settings: *“While working in the guest relations department, I constantly communicated with tourists from different countries... my cultural awareness also increased”* (S7).

The second sub-theme examines sector perception and career planning. For some students, internships confirmed their interest in the tourism sector and helped them make clearer career decisions. *“Thanks to the internship, I was able to create a path for myself in the sector. I especially decided to pursue a career in hospitality”* (S14). For others, internship experiences led them to reconsider their plans because of the demanding working conditions and intense pace. S1 reflected, *“The working hours and fast-paced nature of the tourism sector made me think. I am not sure if I want to work in this field after graduation.”* In some cases, internships did not reduce students’ commitment to tourism but instead redirected them toward different areas, such as event management or organizational management.

The third sub-theme addresses personal, professional, and social challenges, along with the coping strategies used to manage them. Students reported difficulties in adapting to new work environments, long working hours, accommodation conditions, and bureaucratic procedures. *“When I started my internship, my biggest problem was the adaptation process. A new environment, new people, and an intense work pace were initially very challenging for me”* (S6). Others described being assigned tasks outside their field, which limited opportunities for sector-specific learning: *“Some days, I had to do tasks unrelated to my profession... I spoke with my supervisor and explained that I needed to focus more on my main job, and eventually, the task distribution became fairer”* (S13). Social relations with colleagues also posed challenges, particularly when interns were not initially taken seriously or were given limited learning opportunities. Over time, many students learned to cope by improving their communication, seeking support from supervisors and peers, and actively taking on responsibilities.

Taken together, student perspectives indicate that internships play a crucial role in developing professional and interpersonal skills, shaping perceptions of the tourism sector, and influencing career decisions. At the same time, they highlight the need for more effective and supportive applied education processes that strike a balance between learning opportunities and fair and sustainable working conditions.

To provide an integrated overview of students' perspectives on applied education, the main themes and subthemes derived from their internship experiences were synthesized into a summary in Table 4. The table organizes students' views around three overarching themes: the relationship between theoretical and practical knowledge, guidance and support in applied education, and how internships shape professional development, sector perceptions, career planning, and the challenges students encounter. In doing so, it offers a concise map of how students experience the links between classroom learning and workplace practice, the adequacy of institutional and workplace support, and the broader opportunities and constraints that internships create for their future careers.

Table 4. Overview of Main Themes and Sub-Themes Identified in Internship Students' Narratives

Main theme	Sub-themes	Key student views
The Relationship Between Theoretical and Practical Knowledge	Alignment and gaps between theoretical knowledge and practice	Classroom knowledge does not always align with real-world hotel and agency conditions; real life requires more flexible, rapid decision-making and problem-solving.
	Department-based contributions of courses	Some courses (e.g., customer relations, tour planning, destination management, and kitchen management) are considered applicable but may not always be detailed or practice-based.
	Curricular needs (new or strengthened courses)	Students call for more content on conflict/complaint management, crisis management, guest experience, and sustainability/green practices.
Guidance, Support, and Working Conditions in Applied Education	Academic guidance and institutional support	Students report difficulties accessing academic advisors and expect a more structured, proactive, and accessible guidance system from their institutions.
	Workplace mentoring and psychosocial support	The presence of a clear mentor in the workplace strongly supports learning; however, long working hours and a high workload can reduce motivation, and psychological support is often limited.
	Planning of applied education, working conditions, and fairness	Internship programs are sometimes unsystematic; students are often given routine tasks, unpaid internships are perceived as unfair, and placement processes are seen as not fully transparent.
Professional Development, Sector Perception, Career Planning, and Challenges	Professional skills, technical competence, and customer relations	Internships develop communication, problem-solving, technical, and digital skills (e.g., PMS and kitchen operations) as well as foreign-language and cultural awareness.
	Sector perception and career planning (positive and negative effects on motivation)	For some, internships confirm their interest in tourism and clarify career paths; for others, long hours and stress lead to doubts or changes in career plans.
	Personal, professional, and social challenges and coping strategies	Students struggle with adaptation, workload, accommodation, bureaucratic procedures, and social relationships; they cope by improving communication, seeking support, and actively taking on responsibilities.

Discussion

This study examined the influence of internships and other practical training processes on tourism students' professional skill acquisition, employability, and career development, drawing on the perspectives of both students and internship coordinators. Interpreted through Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory and Dewey's (1938) pragmatic understanding of education, the findings show that well-designed internships function as core experiential learning environments rather than peripheral add-ons. When internships are structured, supervised, and aligned with curricular goals, they support all four stages of the experiential learning cycle and contribute directly to students' professional competencies, sectoral adaptation, and career orientations. At the same time, weaknesses in planning, monitoring, and regulation can significantly undermine the long-term benefits of practical education.

A first key result concerns the duration, structure, and content of internships. The study suggests that a minimum period of approximately six weeks can be sufficient for initial adaptation to workplace routines; however, the "ideal" duration must be evaluated in light of sectoral expectations and organizational realities

(Felicien et al., 2014; Lingadkar and Sankaranarayanan, 2023). Consistent with Emir et al. (2008), participants emphasized that internships should be structured learning experiences with clear objectives rather than short-term labour arrangements. This implies a need to go beyond the traditional focus on hotels and to diversify internship placements to include airlines, travel agencies, and food and beverage businesses, thereby enabling students to explore different career paths and make more informed choices (Yiu and Law, 2012). The findings are consistent with research indicating that well-structured internships generate reciprocal benefits for students, institutions, and employers: students gain relevant skills and experience; universities enhance their graduate outcomes and reputation; and businesses access a pool of pre-trained candidates (Ferrerias-Garcia, Sales-Zaguirre, and Serradell-López, 2019; Andriani and Haryati, 2023; Avleeva et al., 2025).

These results also highlight the importance of systematic collaboration between academia and industry. Stakeholders need to engage in continuous dialogue to ensure that internship content and learning outcomes remain aligned with evolving labour market demands (Ferrerias-Garcia et al., 2019; Doniña, 2020). University guidance and mentoring throughout the internship process are crucial for coordinating expectations, conducting fair performance evaluations, and providing feedback on curriculum development (Lee, Chao, and Chen, 2015; Liu, 2023). Such evaluations should encompass not only technical competencies but also soft skills, including communication, teamwork, adaptability, and guest service, which are increasingly critical in service-intensive contexts (Marinakou, 2013; Soffi and Mohamad, 2021). In line with prior research, the present study reinforces the view that systematically integrated internships are a cornerstone of producing “work-ready” graduates in a growing yet demanding tourism and hospitality labour market (Soffi and Mohamad, 2021; Moura et al., 2024).

From an experiential learning perspective, the findings further underline those internships are most effective when students are active participants rather than passive observers. Participants reported greater learning gains when they were entrusted with real responsibilities, involved in problem-solving, and supported to reflect on their experiences in relation to theoretical concepts. Work-based models, in which students spend extended periods in the workplace (e.g., “3+1” arrangements), deepen experiential learning by allowing the full cycle of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation to unfold. However, the study also identified gaps in supervision and monitoring in some institutions, which limit the educational value of internships. These gaps confirm that experiential learning does not automatically emerge from workplace presence; rather, appropriate support structures must be in place to scaffold it.

In this context, mentorship appears to be a pivotal mechanism. The findings align with those of Hu et al. (2025), who demonstrate that mentoring by experienced professionals has a significant impact on interns’ career intentions in the hospitality sector. Mentoring functions, such as professional guidance, social support, and role modeling, help interns interpret workplace experiences, develop realistic expectations, and strengthen their professional identities (Hora, 2020; Shteigman, Levi-Blech, Reshef, 2022). The present study suggests that students’ satisfaction levels condition the impact of mentoring: for students who are already satisfied, mentoring needs to focus on managing expectations and sustaining motivation, whereas for less satisfied students, a more supportive and empowering approach is required to compensate for weaknesses in the internship experience. This aligns with research emphasizing that well-designed mentoring programs can mitigate retention problems in an industry often characterized by challenging working conditions (Chang, 2012; Scerri, Presbury and Goh, 2020; Wang, 2021; Ying et al., 2023).

Moreover, structured self-evaluation and feedback were identified as crucial components of high-quality experiential learning. Consistent with Mekawy and Bakr (2014), students in this study benefited from opportunities to evaluate their own performance and receive regular feedback from both employers and academics. Such practices help them recognize their strengths and weaknesses, clarify their career goals, and connect internship tasks to long-term professional development (Christou and Chatzigeorgiou, 2020; Teng, Lim and Tan, 2024). The literature likewise indicates that the presence of academic supervisors and organizational mentors throughout all stages of the internship enhances guidance quality, creates a supportive learning environment, and improves overall outcomes (Shteigman et al., 2022; Biswakarma and Dhakal, 2023; Ebekozién et al., 2023).

The findings on competencies and employability indicate that the performance criteria of internship coordinators largely overlap with key skill sets identified in the tourism education literature. Professional skill competence, guest relations, foreign language proficiency, professional attitude, work discipline, and teamwork emerged as central evaluation dimensions, in line with broader discussions of management, implementation, critical thinking, ethics, problem-solving, customer service, coping with uncertainty, and

strategic planning (Ferrerias-Garcia et al., 2020). The results confirm that practical training significantly reinforces stress and crisis management skills, which are associated with students' willingness to remain in the sector (Chen et al., 2023; Hassouna and Zaazou, 2024). Studies also show that businesses perceive clear growth in students' competencies when internships are well-structured and supervised. Internships are widely recognized as practical tools for strengthening graduates' employability, particularly in communication, problem-solving, and teamwork (Ferrerias-Garcia et al., 2019; Tecson et al., 2025). Furthermore, the development of transversal skills such as flexibility, networking, cultural awareness, and a "can-do" attitude is viewed as particularly valuable in hospitality and tourism (Sincharoenkul and Witthayasirikul, 2022; Poltimäe, Rõigas and Lorenz 2023). The participants in the present study similarly emphasized gains in communication and self-confidence, especially when interacting with diverse guest profiles (Djurasevic and Kavarić, 2016).

At the same time, the study reveals structural and legal challenges that significantly limit the educational potential of internships. Students reported problems related to prolonged and irregular working hours, excessive workloads, and situations where they were treated more as low-cost labour than as learners. These findings are consistent with earlier studies documenting non-compliance with regulations, limited awareness of intern rights, and highly variable practices across workplaces (Demir and Demir, 2014; Akay, Uslu and Sancar, 2018; Solmaz, 2019). Assigning interns to tasks unrelated to their education and insufficient use of foreign language or technical skills were perceived as significant obstacles to professional development (Armada and Armada, 2024). In line with Soffi and Mohamad (2021), the study underscores the need for a more transparent and more enforceable legal framework that protects interns' welfare and ensures that internships are primarily educational experiences rather than mechanisms to fill labour gaps (Vo, Lee and Lam, 2021; Covrig et al., 2022; Moura et al., 2024). Robust feedback channels between universities, host organizations, and students are also needed to identify problems early and prevent negative experiences from crystallizing into long-term dissatisfaction or sectoral withdrawal (Gül and Altıntaş, 2018; Giousmpasoglou and Marinakou, 2021).

Another important theme is the role of digital technologies in reshaping experiential learning in tourism education. Participants acknowledged the potential of tools such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and simulations to enrich experiential learning by allowing students to practice scenarios and explore destinations in safe, cost-effective ways, supporting research that points to the transformative potential of these technologies (Seo and Kim, 2021; Uludağ, 2023). Virtual internships and technology-mediated learning can extend the reach of experiential education, expose students to international contexts, and partially compensate for resource constraints. However, the findings also echo concerns that excessive reliance on digital environments may erode face-to-face interaction, empathy, and communication skills, which are central to hospitality (Yedla and Ajoon, 2022; Mandalia, 2023). For this reason, technology integration should be deliberate and balanced, combining virtual tools with authentic workplace-based learning and interpersonal engagement. In addition, incorporating digital competencies-such as digital marketing, AI applications, and data analytics-into curricula is increasingly necessary to match sectoral trends (Deniz and Bayram-Öz, 2025).

The study also sheds light on the theory-practice gap and the need to update curricula in line with sectoral needs. Students often perceived a misalignment between classroom-based knowledge (e.g., front office management, reservation systems, sustainable tourism) and the complex realities of day-to-day operations. This supports long-standing arguments that tourism curricula must be more responsive to industry changes and embed stronger practice-oriented content (Cooper and Shepherd, 1997; Tribe, 2005; Özmenekşe, 2021). In line with Croft and Wang (2025), the findings suggest that experiential learning trajectories are influenced by the interplay of personal motivation, academic knowledge, and work experience; theoretical foundations gain their full pedagogical value only when they are intentionally connected to real-world challenges. Participants' calls for greater emphasis on cultural awareness, stress management, and sustainability reflect this need for curricular renewal. Previous research has similarly emphasized that a purely theoretical orientation leaves students underprepared for authentic problem-solving in the field, calling for more active, problem-based, and authentic learning strategies (Ruhanen, Axelsen and Bowles, 2020; AlAli and Al-Barakat, 2024; Quaye et al., 2025). Case studies, field projects, and other practice-oriented activities can help bridge the gap between academic content and industry expectations (Xu et al., 2022). In this respect, experiential pedagogies aim not only to transmit knowledge but also to cultivate graduates who can act as adaptive problem-solvers in a rapidly changing sector (Quaye et al., 2025).

Across the findings, mentorship and guidance emerge again as decisive variables in how students experience internships and interpret the sector. Consistent with Kim, Im and Hwang (2015) and Scandura's (1992) model,

the study confirms that the career-development and psychosocial functions of mentoring are particularly vital under demanding working conditions. Informing students about the sector before placement, supporting them actively during the internship, and providing career guidance afterwards all contribute to greater self-confidence and a more realistic understanding of tourism work (Scerri et al., 2020; Wan, Yang and Xi, 2024; Wang, Hussin and Majid, 2024). The presence of students with prior sectoral experience in classrooms and focus groups has a dual effect: their examples enrich learning, but their strong opinions can also shape the expectations of inexperienced peers, suggesting the need for more nuanced pedagogical strategies in mixed-experience groups (Gül and Altıntaş, 2018; Popoola, Vollem and Nti, 2024) and integrating industry practitioners as guest speakers further enhances the link between academic learning and practice, strengthening students' perceived relevance of coursework and professionalism (Choy and Yeung, 2022; Xu et al., 2022). Evidence also indicates that direct guidance and supervision from industry professionals during internships are more influential in developing work readiness than general organizational socialization processes (Supriyanto et al., 2022; Rahmawati et al., 2024).

Finally, the findings confirm that internships operate as critical “career filters”. In line with Kaya, Oğuz and Yılmaz (2020), Akay and Şıttak (2019), and Robinson, Ruhanen and Breakey (2016), some students in this study reaffirmed their commitment to tourism or discovered specific subfields they wished to pursue, while others decided to leave the sector or shift to alternative roles. This pattern is consistent with Putra, Sulistyawati and Suastini (2025), who find that higher internship quality is associated with a stronger intention to pursue careers in the sector, whereas negative experiences reduce long-term interest (Busby, 2003; Farmaki, 2018; Hakiki et al., 2023). The present results also align with studies indicating that multiple internships can, in some cases, exacerbate disillusionment when workplace conditions are poor (Sitepu et al., 2022). At the same time, students with high career decision-making self-efficacy appear more resilient, persisting in their efforts to remain in hospitality and actively seeking solutions to the challenges they encounter (Wang, 2021; Ramaprasad et al., 2021). This underscores the importance of robust support systems and targeted feedback during internships to prevent avoidable talent losses (Appietu et al., 2019).

Taken together, these findings suggest that ELT offers a powerful lens for understanding the complex interactions between structural conditions, mentoring practices, individual agency, and learning outcomes in tourism internships. Updating curricula, strengthening mentorship, improving legal and working conditions, and making internship processes more systematic and collaborative appear as key steps for aligning tourism education with sectoral expectations and supporting the continuous professional development of future tourism professionals (Chen, Shen and Gosling, 2021; Ishitani, 2024; Leung and Ladkin, 2024). Internships that provide clear goals, meaningful tasks, and consistent feedback can foster students' career adaptability and decision self-efficacy, thereby facilitating smoother transitions to the labour market and enhancing career longevity (Tsai, Hsu and Yang, 2017; Bhalla and Dawra, 2019; Ramaprasad et al., 2021).

Conclusion and Implications

This study contributes to tourism education research by offering an integrated analysis of applied education processes in Türkiye from the dual perspective of internship students and internship coordinator academics. Unlike many single-actor studies, this design reveals how experiential learning processes are shaped by the interaction of students, mentors, institutional structures, and sectoral conditions. The evidence demonstrates how Kolb's experiential learning cycle is enacted-and sometimes disrupted-within tourism and hospitality internship programs, highlighting the central role of program design, mentoring quality, and curriculum-industry alignment.

The findings confirm that internships and other practical training processes are indispensable components of tourism education. When properly structured, they provide students with authentic exposure to work environments, strengthen professional skills, enhance employability, and support more informed career decision-making. At the same time, the study shows that these benefits are contingent on the quality of the internship process. Inadequate supervision, limited learning opportunities, and weak legal protections can turn internships into sources of frustration that discourage graduates from remaining in the sector.

Several practical implications emerge for higher education institutions, policymakers, and industry stakeholders:

1. Curriculum-industry alignment: Tourism curricula should more closely reflect contemporary industry demands by incorporating sector-specific digital tools and software, and by reinforcing content on customer relations, crisis and stress management, sustainable tourism, cultural awareness, and guest

experience management. These areas are critical for preparing students for an increasingly global and experience-oriented tourism market (Cooper and Shepherd, 1997; Ruhanen et al., 2020; Deniz and Bayram-Öz, 2025).

2. Structured internship design and mentoring: The quality of internships is as important as their mere existence. Programs should include clear learning outcomes, structured evaluation criteria, and systematic mentoring arrangements that prevent students from being used primarily as inexpensive labour. Stronger collaboration between universities and tourism businesses, including co-developing curricula and regular consultation, can help ensure that internships remain educationally meaningful (Yiu and Law, 2012; Ferreras-Garcia et al., 2019; Doniņa, 2020).
3. Improved working and legal conditions: Enhancing working conditions during internships through fair workload distribution, reasonable working hours, transparent compensation, and explicit legal protections would strengthen the link between academic learning and professional practice and reduce the risk of losing qualified graduates due to negative early experiences (Solmaz, 2019; Soffi and Mohamad, 2021; Moura et al., 2024).
4. Attention to student diversity and prior experience: The study highlights the different expectations and interpretations of students with and without prior sectoral work experience. Recognizing and managing this diversity in classrooms and internship placements is important; experienced students can enrich discussions but may also shape the attitudes of less-experienced peers. More nuanced pedagogical strategies and peer-learning designs are needed to ensure equitable benefits for all students (Gül and Altıntaş, 2018; Popoola et al., 2024).
5. Career development and retention: Internships serve as key testing grounds in the career decision-making process. High-quality experiences strengthen students' commitment to the sector, whereas poor conditions foster disillusionment and exit. Enhancing mentoring, reflection opportunities, and career guidance can increase career adaptability and decision self-efficacy, supporting both individual career development and sectoral retention (Farmaki, 2018; Wang, 2021; Ramaprasad et al., 2021; Leung and Ladkin, 2024).

In conclusion, the study argues that applied learning processes in tourism education should be viewed as both an academic requirement and a strategic investment in the sector's human capital, rather than merely as a formal obligation. Education models designed within the framework of ELT, supported by robust institutional structures, effective mentorship, and fair working conditions, have the potential to enhance the professional development of tourism students, facilitate their adaptation to the industry, and contribute to a more qualified and resilient workforce. Strengthening the synergy among universities, students, and tourism businesses will be critical to ensuring a more effective transition from education to employment and to supporting the sustainable development of the tourism sector.

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