A Gap Analysis of Employer Expectations and Intern Performance at a Higher Education Institution

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ABSTRACT

Industrial training serves as a pivotal mechanism for connecting academic learning with professional practice. However, a persistent concern across higher education institutions is the misalignment between what employers expect from interns and what interns deliver. This study examines the gap between employer expectations and the actual performance of 918 interns as evaluated directly by their industry supervisors or employers across two academic sessions in 2024 using a quantitative, survey-based research design. Drawing on six evaluated criteria (job attitude, personal efficiency, initiative taking, intellectual skills, communication skills, and leadership skills), the study ranks employer priorities, assesses employer-rated intern performance, and applies a gap analysis approach to identify areas of alignment and divergence. Findings reveal that job attitude and personal efficiency are the criteria most valued by employers, while leadership skills and communication skills ranked lowest in employer expectations. Overall, interns performed above employer expectations on four of six criteria, with leadership skills recording the largest positive gap (0.6416). Notably, interns performed below expectation on job attitude and personal efficiency, both of which were ranked among the top employer priorities, constituting the most critical performance gaps identified. In order to address these disparities and improve the employability of these graduates, the study ends with curriculum-informed recommendations for both the university and industry.

Keywords*:* Industrial training, Employer Expectations, Intern Performance, Gap Analysis, Employability

INTRODUCTION

Industrial training, commonly referred to as internship or work-based learning, has become a central pillar of higher education across the globe. By situating students within real professional environments, it bridges the theoretical knowledge acquired in the classroom with the practical competencies demanded by the modern workplace. For universities such as Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), where industrial training is a mandatory component of most undergraduate and diploma programmes, the quality of the internship experience carries direct implications for graduate employability, institutional reputation, and the ongoing relevance of academic curricula.

Despite the widely documented benefits of industrial training for students, employers, and institutions alike (Sawani et al., 2016; Johnson, 2022), a persistent and structurally significant problem remains: employers frequently report that interns do not meet their performance expectations. Across disciplines and national contexts, the literature has consistently identified gaps in essential skills including communication, critical thinking, initiative, and professional conduct (Cheang & Yamashita, 2023; Bist et al., 2020).

At UiTM Terengganu, where students across diverse faculties undertake internships in both the public and private sectors, understanding the precise nature and scale of this gap between expectations and performance is essential for addressing both academic and institutional needs.

The present study responds to this need by conducting a systematic gap analysis comparing employer expectations and intern performance across six key internship evaluation criteria (job attitude, personal efficiency, initiative taking, intellectual skills, communication skills, and leadership skills). Using data collected from 918 actively enrolled interns across two academic sessions, this study ranks the criteria most valued by employers, assesses the performance of interns as evaluated by their employers against those criteria, and measures the gap between them. In doing so, it generates empirical evidence that can directly inform curriculum development, pre-internship training design, and university-industry collaboration strategies at UiTM Terengganu.

The study is guided by three specific objectives: (i) to rank the criteria considered most important by employers; (ii) to assess the intern performance evaluated by employers based on these criteria; and (iii) to evaluate the gap between employer expectations and intern performance through a gap analysis approach. The findings are expected to benefit multiple stakeholders - students, academic faculty, university administrators, and industry partners by highlighting where alignment exists and where intervention is most urgently required.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ranking the Criteria Considered Most Important by Employers

A foundational step in understanding the expectations-performance gap is identifying and prioritising the specific criteria against which employer evaluations of interns are made. The literature consistently demonstrates that employers do not weigh all competencies equally; rather, they place particular emphasis on dispositional and attitudinal qualities above technical or academic skills.

A study on the skill gap between employers and student interns explored by Valdez et al. (2025) revealed that employers targeted students with strong basic skills on communication, computer literacy, and being good with numbers. In contrast to the hard skills, employers prioritizing competencies such as financial reporting and risk assessment more heavily than the interns did. For interpersonal skills, employers valued practice on collaboration and negotiation, while students ranked them lower. The other skills addressed by employees are necessary tools in 21st-century skills: initiative and ICT literacy and supplementary skills: decision-making and data analysis - where students showed less awareness.

Cheang and Yamashita (2023) provide direct and well-evidenced insights on this ranking question. In their two-phase study involving 66 internship supervisors and 76 employers polled at a university career fair, they found that attitude and work ethic was the most frequently cited employer criterion at 38%, followed by communication skills (34%), critical thinking and problem-solving (16%), and the ability to work well with others (12%). Importantly, almost 62% of employers in their sample indicated that they would be unlikely to hire academically strong graduates who lacked soft skills, underscoring that dispositional qualities constitute threshold criteria rather than supplementary preferences. As one internship supervisor in their focus groups observed, organisations would rather hire the attitude and train the skills, a sentiment that captures the primacy of character over competency in employer priority hierarchies.

Asmui et al. (2025) offer a complementary Malaysian university-based ranking. In their study of 156 UiTM interns evaluated by employers on four competency dimensions, work ethics emerged as the highest-rated employer criterion (M = 6.40), followed by ICT competencies (M = 6.18), communication competencies (M = 6.01), and cognitive abilities (M = 5.93). At the individual item level, honesty and trustworthiness (M = 6.60), professional appearance (M = 6.53), and punctuality (M = 6.51) were the most valued attributes, reinforcing that character-based and ethical dimensions of professional conduct are consistently positioned at the apex of employer priority frameworks.

Bist et al. (2020), drawing on in-depth interviews with 20 senior corporate managers and a survey of 190 company supervisors in India, found that communication was the single most frequently occurring term in employer descriptions of critical internship competencies, followed by analytical skills, teamwork, problem-solving, and IT proficiency. This cross-national convergence on the primacy of communication is highly significant, as it implies that this criterion should consistently anchor employer evaluation frameworks regardless of discipline or sector.

Sawani et al. (2016), focusing specifically on accounting interns from UiTM Sarawak, reported that compliance to rules and regulations ranked highest among employer satisfaction criteria (M = 3.944), followed by interpersonal skills (M = 3.938), general skills (M = 3.862), responsibility and accountability (M = 3.794), and competency (M = 3.731). The relatively lower rankings of technical knowledge and reporting skills in this discipline-specific framework further demonstrate that professional conduct and compliance consistently outrank technical proficiency in employer criteria hierarchies, even within technical disciplines.

Mohamad et al. (2024), examining the relative predictive weight of leadership skills, IT literacy skills, and teamwork ability on intern employability among 113 internship coordinators from Malaysian public sector organisations, found that teamwork ability was the strongest predictor (beta = 0.405), ahead of leadership skills (beta = 0.346) and IT literacy skills (beta = 0.257). These three predictors together explained 88% of the variance in employability, suggesting that collaborative and interpersonal competencies carry the greatest weight in employer assessments of intern potential.

Assessing the Actual Performance of Interns Based on Employer Criteria

Once employer criteria are established, the literature turns to how well student interns perform against these benchmarks. A consistent pattern emerges students tend to perform adequately or above average on attitudinal and behavioural dimensions but fall short on higher-order cognitive, communicative, and analytical competencies that employers simultaneously prioritise most highly.

Asmui et al. (2025) reported generally favourable performance levels among UiTM BA232 interns, with work performance receiving a high overall mean score (M = 6.23). Students performed strongest on willingness to work beyond job description (M = 6.39), responsiveness to task requirements (M = 6.37), and flexibility in task assignments (M = 6.29). However, the ability to supervise related practices and processes within their specialisation — a proxy for leadership capability — recorded the lowest performance score (M = 5.95), mirroring the literature's broader finding that management and leadership competencies are consistently underdeveloped among interns.

Research on the impact of digital learning environments on employer satisfaction among accounting interns was conducted by Amilia et al. (2023). Their findings indicated that digital learning environments have a significant positive impact on employer satisfaction regarding accounting interns. Employers are particularly shown their satisfaction regarding interns' proficiency in three core aspects of skills: technical and functional, communication and organizational management. This research also revealed that interns who have undergone digital learning during their undergraduate studies are perceived as well-prepared and capable by employers. Besides, embedding digital learning environment in accounting internships is valuable for both interns' skill development and the employers' operational needs. It helps align academic curricula with real-world industry expectations, ensuring interns can handle digital-era accounting tasks effectively.

Monogaran & Subramaniam (2022) studied the gap between intern self-assessment and employer expectations among male and female interns in Malaysia. They concluded that although both genders tended to overestimate their abilities in six out of seven skill areas conducted, but female interns pointed higher levels of overconfidence, rating themselves significantly higher than employer assessments reported, thus leading to larger gaps between self-perception and reality. Male interns were more realistic in their self-assessments, with notable strengths in lifelong learning and information management. It is also found that the major difference between employer expectations and intern performance lies in communication, leadership, and team skills. Both genders recognized their low competence in these areas, though the weakness was more dominant among male interns. Employers prioritize values, attitudes, and professionalism alongside communication and leadership skills, while interns slightly met expectations in professionalism but struggled to meet expectations regarding interpersonal leadership.

Bist et al. (2020) present a more critical performance picture. Across their 22-item evaluation instrument, students received their highest performance ratings for being proactive (M = 4.2) and reliable and committed (M = 4.0). However, the items most valued by employers — communication-related skills — were simultaneously those on which students performed worst. Specifically, speaking and writing clearly (M = 2.6) and the ability to convey messages effectively (M = 2.5) recorded the two lowest scores of all 22 items evaluated, and this pattern

was consistent across all sectors studied, from finance to manufacturing, confirming that weak communication performance is not sector-specific but is a systemic deficit in management graduate preparation.

Cheang and Yamashita (2023) found that internship supervisors rated student interns between average and good on approximately half of the 12 evaluation items, while the other half received good or better ratings.

Qualitative data from focus group sessions were more critical, with supervisors frequently reporting that interns arrived unprepared, demonstrated a passive dependence on direction rather than independent initiative, and displayed nonchalance toward the professional significance of the internship experience. Approximately 35% of survey respondents in their study concluded that student interns were not work-ready at the time of placement, a finding that carries significant implications for pre-internship preparation at the institutional level.

Sawani et al. (2016) found that while 91.2% of employers reported overall satisfaction with accounting interns' performance, granular analysis revealed that the weakest performance dimensions were knowledge (M = 3.442) and reporting skills (M = 3.350) - the two criteria ranked lowest in overall employer satisfaction. Students performed strongest on compliance to rules and regulations and interpersonal skills, consistent with the broader pattern of strong attitudinal performance contrasted with weaker technical and communicative performance.

Evaluating the Gap Between Employer Expectations and Intern Performance

The gap between employer expectations and intern performance is the central concern of the reviewed literature. Across multiple studies and national contexts, the gap is not uniformly distributed: it is largest and most consequential in the very competencies that employers rank as most important. Urquía-Grande & Estébanez (2020) analyzed the internship expectations gap amongst the three main internship stakeholders: employers (company supervisors), academic supervisors and students. They found that intern students with high value on soft skills feel their academic skills are less relevant in practice, while the employers are happy with social fitness and attitude but dissatisfied with the creativity and deep cognitive application. From academic supervisors' side, they value formal reporting and feedback but may be overlooking the importance of transversal growth. They suggested these gaps must be solved to improve internship outcomes and close the gaps.

Bist et al. (2020) provide the starkest illustration of this paradox. Communication skills were simultaneously the most frequently cited employer requirement in the qualitative phase and the lowest-performing dimension in the quantitative performance evaluation, representing a direct and actionable expectations-performance gap. The authors argued that this misalignment is not incidental but reflects the systemic underemphasis on applied communication development within management education, and recommended that communication training be embedded continuously throughout the degree curriculum rather than confined to standalone courses.

Cheang and Yamashita (2023) documented a well-evidenced gap in critical thinking and problem-solving — a dimension that employers ranked third in priority yet which supervisors identified as consistently underdeveloped in interns. The tendency for interns to wait for supervisors to provide all answers rather than independently analysing situations and proposing solutions was identified as a defining characteristic of the performance gap in this domain, pointing to a deficit that is as much dispositional as it is cognitive.

Asmui et al. (2025) approached the gap question through correlation analysis, finding that cognitive abilities, which recorded the lowest mean among all employer-rated competency dimensions (M = 5.93), demonstrated a very strong relationship with work performance (r = 0.849). This finding implies that even when cognitive ability is rated relatively lower, its contribution to overall performance outcomes is substantial, meaning that even modest improvements in this area could yield disproportionately large performance gains.

Johnson (2022) addressed the gap from an institutional and systemic perspective, arguing that insufficient information sharing between employers and educational institutions constitutes a structural driver of the expectations-performance mismatch. When institutional barriers such as high adjunct faculty turnover, administrative silos, or the absence of dedicated employer liaison roles, impede the flow of labour market intelligence into curriculum design, the gap between what is taught and what employers need widens. Johnson's (2022) findings therefore situate the expectations-performance gap not merely as a student-level competency deficit, but as a systemic problem that requires institutional and partnership-level solutions.

Mohamad et al. (2024) reinforced this point by demonstrating that the 12% of variance in employability unexplained by their three-predictor model implies that additional competency dimensions, potentially including cultural intelligence, digital adaptability, or domain-specific technical skills may contribute to the gap in ways not yet fully captured by existing frameworks. This finding provides a clear direction for future research extending the boundaries of gap analysis beyond the conventional soft-skills paradigm.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research design employing a survey method to examine the discrepancy between employer expectations and the actual performance of interns evaluated by the employers during their industrial training. A quantitative approach was deemed most appropriate given the need to produce descriptive and comparative statistical data across a large and heterogeneous sample, and to enable systematic gap analysis through mean score comparisons across multiple competency dimensions (Creswell, 2014).

Population and Census

A census approach was adopted, involving the entire population of 918 interns who were formally evaluated by their employers across two academic sessions: session 20242 (March 2024 – August 2024; n = 225, 24.5%) and session 20244 (October 2024 – February 2025; n = 693, 75.5%). The population represented seven faculties spanning both diploma (n = 468, 51.0%) and degree (n = 450, 49.0%) programmes, comprising 541 female (58.9%) and 377 male (41.1%) students.

Research Instrument

A structured questionnaire served as the primary data collection instrument. It comprised three main sections: (i) intern demographic profiles (academic session, level of study, faculty, programme, and gender); (ii) employer expectations across six competency criteria (job attitude, personal efficiency, initiative taking, intellectual skills, communication skills, and leadership skills); and (iii) the intern's actual workplace performance evaluated on the identical six criteria. Content validity of the instrument was established through a comprehensive literature review and consultations with industry partners. To verify internal consistency, reliability analysis was performed on the data, yielding a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.894 for the employer expectations scale and 0.918 for the intern performance scale, demonstrating high measurement reliability (Hair et al., 2019).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected via an online platform to ensure easy access and convenience for employers across various internship placement sites. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were computed to summarize the demographic profile of respondents, the ranking of employer expectations, and the level of intern performance. To identify and quantify discrepancies between expectations and performance, a gap analysis was conducted by subtracting the mean employer expectation score from the mean intern performance score for each criterion. A positive gap indicated that intern performance exceeded employer expectations, whereas a negative gap denoted performance below expectations. Furthermore, paired-samples t-tests were performed across each criterion and for the overall aggregate score to determine whether the observed differences were statistically significant. All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the 918 respondents who participated in the study. The majority of respondents were enrolled in the October 2024 – February 2025 academic session (n = 693, 75.5%), with the remaining 24.5% from the March 2024 – August 2024 session. The sample was nearly evenly split between diploma (51.0%) and degree (49.0%) students and was predominantly female (58.9%). The largest faculty representation came from Computer and Mathematical Sciences (CS) with 382 students (41.6%), followed by

Hotel and Tourism Management (HM) with 226 students (24.6%) and Applied Sciences (AS) with 130 students (14.2%).

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 918)

Variable	**Category**	**No. of Students**	**Percentage, %**
Academic Session	March 2024 – August 2024 (20242)	225	24.5
	October 2024 – February 2025 (20244)	693	75.5
Level of Study	Diploma	468	51
	Degree	450	49
Faculty	Accountancy (AC)	42	4.6
	Applied Sciences (AS)	130	14.2
	Business and Management (BM)	67	7.3
	Computer and Mathematical Sciences (CS)	382	41.6
	Electrical Engineering (EE)	42	4.6
	Mechanical Engineering (EM)	29	3.2
	Hotel and Tourism Management (HM)	226	24.6
Gender	Male	377	41.1
	Female	541	58.9
Total		**918**	**100**

Employer Expectations: Ranking of Criteria

Table 2 presents the mean scores and rankings of the six criteria based on direct evaluations of employer expectations. The overall mean expectation score was 8.4129 (SD = 1.16369), indicating a uniformly high level of employer expectations across all criteria.

Job attitude emerged as the most highly expected criterion (M = 8.8105, SD = 1.21716, Rank 1), followed by personal efficiency (M = 8.5882, SD = 1.20548, Rank 2) and initiative taking (M = 8.3796, SD = 1.31303, Rank 3). Intellectual skills ranked fourth (M = 8.2865, SD = 1.25254), communication skills fifth (M = 8.2157, SD = 1.23662), and leadership skills ranked lowest among all criteria (M = 7.8061, SD = 1.52389, Rank 6). These results confirm that employers place the greatest value on dispositional and attitudinal qualities, specifically job attitude and personal efficiency, over higher-order cognitive or technical competencies, a finding that is consistent with the broader literature reviewed (Cheang & Yamashita, 2023; Asmui et al., 2025).

Table 2: Employer Expectations by Criterion (N = 918)

Criteria	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**	**Rank**
Job Attitude	8.8105	1.21716	1
Personal Efficiency	8.5882	1.20548	2
Initiative Taking	8.3796	1.31303	3
Intellectual Skills	8.2865	1.25254	4
Communication Skills	8.2157	1.23662	5
Leadership Skills	7.8061	1.52389	6
Overall	**8.4129**	**1.16369**	

Intern Performance: Assessment Against Employer Criteria

Table 3 presents the mean scores and rankings of intern performance across the six criteria as evaluated by employers. The overall performance mean was 8.5077 (SD = 1.19924), which marginally exceeded the overall employer expectation mean of 8.4129.

Job attitude retained its position as the highest-ranked performance dimension (M = 8.6955, SD = 1.25895, Rank 1), with personal efficiency in second place (M = 8.5286, SD = 1.27521, Rank 2) and initiative taking third (M = 8.4997, SD = 1.29704, Rank 3). Notably, the ranking of the lower four criteria shifted considerably between the expectation and performance frameworks. Leadership skills, which ranked lowest in employer expectations, moved to fourth position in interns' performance (M = 8.4477, SD = 1.26492), while intellectual skills, which ranked fourth in employer expectations, fell to sixth in interns' performance (M = 8.3845, SD = 1.23781). This inversion is particularly meaningful as it reveals that employers rated interns' actual leadership performance significantly higher than their initial expectations, while rating their intellectual skills comparatively lower.

Table 3: Intern Performance by Criterion (N = 918)

Criteria	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
Job Attitude	8.6955	1.25895	1
Personal Efficiency	8.5286	1.27521	2
Initiative Taking	8.4997	1.29704	3
Leadership Skills	8.4477	1.26492	4
Communication Skills	8.4161	1.20405	5
Intellectual Skills	8.3845	1.23781	6
Overall	**8.5077**	**1.19924**	

Gap Analysis: Expectations versus Performance

Table 4 presents the gap analysis results, computed by subtracting employer expectation mean scores from intern performance mean scores for each criterion. Results from the paired samples t-test confirmed that the differences between employer expectations and intern performance were statistically significant across all six evaluated criteria, as well as for the overall score ($p < .05$). The overall mean gap was positive (0.0948, SD = 0.6056), indicating that interns' aggregate performance slightly exceeded employer expectations. Four of the six criteria recorded performance exceeding expectations, with leadership skills displaying the largest positive gap (0.6416, SD = 1.0505).

Conversely, significant negative gaps were observed in job attitude (-0.1149, SD = 0.7646) and personal efficiency (-0.0596, SD = 0.8025), indicating that intern performance fell below employer benchmarks on these key dimensions. This constitutes the most critical finding of the study: interns underperformed precisely on the two dimensions that employers prioritized above all others (ranked first and second in employer expectations, respectively). This shortfall highlights a direct and meaningful misalignment between the core professional conduct demanded by industry supervisors and the actual performance demonstrated by interns in the workplace.

Taken together, these gap analysis results suggest that while UiTM Terengganu students are largely performing well during their internship, the areas most urgently requiring attention are not the traditionally highlighted technical or communicative competencies but rather the attitudinal and personal efficiency dimensions that employers regard as foundational prerequisites for professional suitability.

Table 4: Gap Analysis of Intern Performance Minus Employer Expectations (N = 918)

Criteria	Mean Gap(Intern Performance – Employer Expectations)	Std. Deviation	Status
Communication Skills	0.2004	0.8099	Above Expectation

Intellectual Skills	0.098	0.7999	Above Expectation
Initiative Taking	0.1201	0.8621	Above Expectation
Job Attitude	-0.1149	0.7646	Below Expectation
Personal Efficiency	-0.0596	0.8025	Below Expectation
Leadership Skills	0.6416	1.0505	Above Expectation
Overall	**0.0948**	**0.6056**	**Above Expectation**

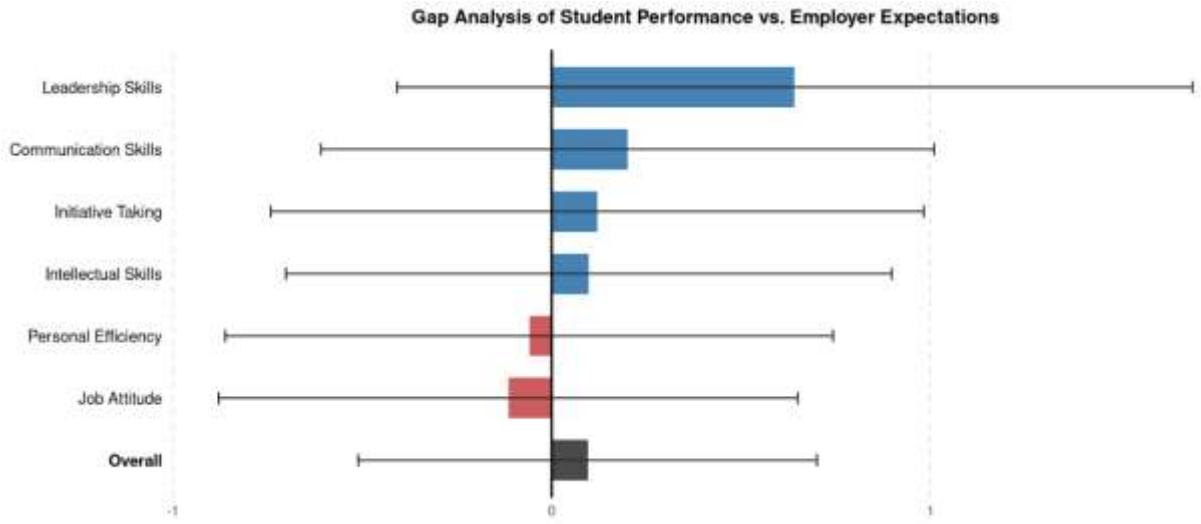


Figure 1: Gap Analysis of Intern Performance vs. Employer Expectations

The findings of this study generate several important insights that both confirm and extend the existing literature on employer expectations and internship performance.

The dominance of job attitude and personal efficiency at the top of the employer expectations ranking is consistent with what Cheang and Yamashita (2023) described as the primacy of personal attributes over technical skills in employer evaluation frameworks. In their study, employers overwhelmingly prioritised attitude and work ethic, and supervisors frequently expressed the view that they would rather hire a strong attitude and train the technical skills. The present study confirms that this priority framework holds in the Malaysian public university context, across a wide range of disciplines and programme levels. Asmui et al. (2025) similarly found that work ethics, which encompasses honesty, trustworthiness, and punctuality, was the highest-rated employer criterion in their UiTM sample. The consistency of these rankings across very different study designs, sample sizes, and faculty compositions lends strong weight to the conclusion that job attitude and professional conduct are genuinely non-negotiable foundations of employer satisfaction with interns.

The finding that interns performed below expectation on job attitude and personal efficiency, despite these being the most important employer criteria, represents the core theoretical and practical contribution of this study. It is not sufficient to note simply that a gap exists; the critical insight is that the gap is concentrated precisely where it matters most. This pattern mirrors Bist et al.'s (2020) observation that communication — also a top employer priority in their framework — was simultaneously the dimension on which management interns performed worst. In both studies, the gap is not randomly distributed across criteria but is structurally anchored in the highest-priority dimensions, suggesting that there is something systematically deficient in how universities prepare students for the attitudinal and professional conduct aspects of workplace performance.

The large positive gap in leadership skills (0.6416) indicates that industry supervisors rated interns' leadership contributions significantly higher than their initial expectations. This may suggest that while employers set modest baseline expectations for temporary interns regarding leadership responsibilities, interns frequently demonstrated commendable initiative in taking charge of project tasks and peer coordination. Similarly, the positive gap in communication skills (0.2004) demonstrates that employers found interns' day to day

communicative interactions to be satisfactory and above the baseline threshold required for internship placements.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the gap between employer expectations and the actual performance of UiTM Terengganu student interns across six key competency criteria. Through a quantitative, survey-based gap analysis involving 918 students across seven faculties and two academic sessions, three key findings emerge. First, employers consistently prioritise job attitude and personal efficiency above all other internship competencies, with leadership skills and communication skills ranking lowest in their expectations. Second, students generally perform at or above employer expectations overall, with leadership skills recording the largest positive performance gap. Third, and most critically, students perform below employer expectations on the two criteria ranked most important — job attitude and personal efficiency — representing the most significant and actionable gap identified by this study.

These findings make a distinctive contribution to the literature on internship performance and graduate employability in the Malaysian higher education context. They extend prior work by Asmui et al. (2025), Cheang and Yamashita (2023), Bist et al. (2020), and Mohamad et al. (2024) by demonstrating that the expectations-performance gap is not uniformly distributed across competency dimensions but is concentrated precisely in the areas that employers regard as most foundational. This structural pattern implies that addressing the gap requires not merely adding more content to existing curricula but fundamentally re-examining how universities cultivate professional identity, attitudinal readiness, and self-management capacity in students before and during their industrial training.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For the University and Academic Faculties

The finding that job attitude and personal efficiency, both dispositional qualities, are the criteria on which students fall below employer expectations suggests that universities must go beyond conventional technical and communicative skills training in their pre-internship preparation programs. Academic faculties should develop structured professionalism modules that explicitly address workplace conduct, attendance discipline, self-management, time management, and the behavioural expectations of professional environments. These modules should be embedded as mandatory pre-internship components across all seven faculties, not merely offered as optional workshops.

For the Computer and Mathematical Sciences faculty, which constituted the largest single faculty group in this study at 41.6% of respondents, particular attention should be paid to developing interpersonal and attitudinal competencies alongside technical proficiency, as students in technically oriented disciplines may be more susceptible to the assumption that technical excellence alone is sufficient for employer satisfaction.

For Industry and Employer Partners

The below-expectation gaps in job attitude and personal efficiency suggest that employers should build more structured onboarding and orientation processes for interns at the commencement of placement, clearly communicating professional conduct expectations, attendance standards, and workplace norms in an explicit and measurable way. Johnson (2022) found that when internship experiences are structured, well-supervised, and include regular feedback mechanisms, they produce significantly more positive outcomes for both students and organisations.

Employers are also encouraged to provide formative feedback to interns at mid-placement milestones rather than only at the conclusion of the internship. Timely, specific, and constructive feedback on job attitude and personal efficiency would give students the opportunity to adjust their professional conduct while still in placement, potentially closing the performance gap in real time. Sawani et al. (2016) recommended that the availability of supervisors who can assign varying levels of tasks and monitor intern performance is essential to a fruitful hands-on experience.

For Students

Students are strongly encouraged to approach their industrial training with the same level of commitment and professional seriousness as a full-time employment position. The supervisors in Cheang and Yamashita's (2023) focus groups noted that many interns mistakenly regard their placement as temporary and inconsequential, a mindset that directly contributes to the negative gaps observed in job attitude and personal efficiency. Students should seek to understand the expectations of their host organisations before commencing placement, arrive prepared with knowledge of the organisation's mission and objectives, maintain consistent punctuality and attendance, and proactively seek tasks and responsibilities rather than waiting to be directed.

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ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical Approval

The approval for this study was granted by the Research Management Unit, UiTM Cawangan Terengganu Kampus Kuala Terengganu. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no financial, personal, or professional conflicts of interest that could be perceived as influencing the work reported in this paper.

DATA AVAILABILITY

Although the data are not publicly available due to participant privacy restrictions outlined in the ethical review agreement, they are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.