



International Students and Their Internship Success in Thailand: What Factors Contribute to Achievement?

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Abstract

This study seeks to understand the interaction between academic and internship performance among international students in addition to other factors, within Thailand academic context for 2023-2024. Utilizing quantitative data from self-completed questionnaires by 40 international students and qualitative insights from interviews with seven employers across various industries in Thailand, this research examines the impact of factors such as GPA, soft skill training, networking skills, prior work experience, IT platform utilization, and participation in extracurricular activities and internship performance. Despite 78% of students considering GPA important for securing relevant internships, all employers emphasized the greater value of soft skills over hard skills, with all deeming soft competencies critical versus only 33% who valued academic skills. The research also proves that there are differences in skills demanded by sectors, particularly within the hospitality industry. Soft skills are most important for the retail and F&B sectors (95%), and corporate work requires both hard, soft, and technical skills.

The results outlined significant directions for enhancing curriculum development for ESOL in terms of needs analysis and preparation programs compared with the ESOL employment market. The challenges the study portrays reveal arising issues in skills, especially soft skills affecting international students. Moreover, the study stresses the need for inclusive pre-internship orientation programs that promote language competency and cultural sensitivity in multifaceted practice settings. These insights have important implications for educational organizations in developing better international student support models and internship readiness programs.

Keywords: *International Students, Internship Success, Academic Performance, Soft Skills, Industry Requirements, Work Experience*

1. Introduction

To create graduates with more real-world employment experience, university programs incorporate an internship as part of the curriculum. In recent years, as more students from outside Thailand enroll in Thai universities, the question of what can influence intern success has gained prominence. To these international students, internships offer the real-life transition from learning to the working environment. Such internships help students develop the ability to accommodate new cultures, social relations, and working conditions (Zhong, 2024).

Distinct roadblocks, such as language proficiency and the recognition of cultural expectations, may disproportionately affect international students compared to local counterparts. (Arthur & Koomson, 2024). In the past, among employers, GPA has been positively linked to student ability and job performance (Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2000). However, today's employers seek qualities other than academic achievements, such as soft skills, networking, work experience, and extracurricular activities. In addition to meeting the academic burden required by their studies, international students face the unique challenge of adapting to new cultural practices presented by studying in a foreign country (Calfoforo, 2023).

While GPA remains relevant, flexibility, interpersonal communication, and networking skills have emerged as crucial features for internships (Zhao & Liden, 2011). Hendrickson (2018) opined that in the assessment of prospective candidates, problem-solving and teamwork skills are valued more than book



wisdom. Additionally, networking is beneficial, particularly for international students who may lack knowledge of local customs, industry standards, and professional connections. It facilitates information exchange, generates opportunities, and creates valuable references (Arthur & Koomsom, 2024).

Internships facilitate the transition from school to employment, fostering improved career prospects, enhanced earning potential, and a reduction in skills gaps. (Santosa et al., 2024). Online platforms like LinkedIn, Fiverr, and Upwork have expanded access to employment opportunities for international students by reducing geographical and social barriers. These tools aim to simplify the internship search, enhance career development, and improve the overall educational experience. (Hendrawan, Novianto, & Sahara, 2024). Internships are important for bridging the transitioning process between theory and practice, as well as for improving employment opportunities for students (Santosa et al., 2024). Such programs are extremely useful to international students in the host country environments and for them to make sense of the various work settings that they come across (Arthur & Koomson, 2024). An exam coupled with the GPA has been a signal of capability and work ethic that many employers have used to help them identify the right talent to hire; however, it is not noticeably clear how this success translates to internship outcomes for international students.

Zhao and Liden (2011) note that employers reward academic performance in ways that relate to work performance, particularly in problem-solving tasks. However, Hendrickson (2018) has questioned the effectiveness of academic preconditions for international-level professional competencies. New cultural settings require other factors, such as flexibility and prior experience, instead of relying solely on academic achievement for initial employment, according to Santosa et al. (2024). In Calfoforo (2023), the author notes that although academic profiles provide the keys, soft skills define the results of internships.

Soft skills, networking, work experience, and extracurricular activities contribute to the success of internships more than academic factors do. Job seekers without good common skills, including communication, conflict resolution, and teamwork are considered less employable than their academically brilliant counterparts (Hendrickson, 2018). Integrated networks become the key to developing internships for international students, and the availability of career fairs, LinkedIn, and student associations helps create professional networks. Paid work, internships, part-time jobs, and volunteer practices characterize work experience for employers and showcase their resilience (Zhao & Liden, 2011).

Both the use of digital media and participation in international extracurricular activities are essential in preparing for a career. Participation in sports, volunteering, and other commitments creates social capital and professional competencies (Hendrickson, 2018). These activities build feelings of affiliation and enable international students to acquire necessary personality qualities such as teamwork and leadership (Calfoforo, 2023). New-generation platforms like LinkedIn, Fiverr, and Upwork are some of the doors through which students can personally approach employers and let them know what they can do (Hendrawan et al., 2024).

Asian students remain sensitive to language and cultural differences in addition to having limited access to social contacts. These challenges can influence their internship experiences, especially when they are balancing professional practice with the host country's expectations (Zhong, 2024). Culturally competent communication is an essential attribute for career practice. Visa rules and work permit laws inhibit internship placements; therefore, there is a call to liberalize Visa rules or to find internship placements in other countries, as suggested by Santosa et al. (2024).

These results are beneficial for many stakeholders who engage with international students in the internship experience. For universities, knowing which factors generate internship success provides institutions with the framework to prepare students for future success in industry. The insights are useful to inform the recommended intervention means necessary to aid learners in fostering interpersonal skills, incorporating cultural issues, and ensuring effective networking strategies (Arthur & Koomson, 2024).



2. Objectives

Despite research exploring the benefits of internships in enhancing career prospects and defining career goals (Kapareliotis, Voutsina, & Patsiotis, 2019), there remains a gap in understanding the strategies for securing internships or identifying which aspects should be prioritized during the application process. Baert et al. (2021) further highlight the significant impact of internships on improving job opportunities. However, much of the existing employment-focused research emphasizes academic performance while neglecting other factors such as soft skills, networking, extracurricular involvement, and prior experiences. This study seeks to address this gap by analyzing how academic success influences internship opportunities for international students. Its findings aim to guide universities, career counselors, and employers in balancing their focus between academic support and skill enhancement, based on identified determinants of success.

In pursuing this objective, the following research questions are explored:

- 1) Does academic performance, as reflected in GPA, influence the difficulty international students face in securing an internship?
- 2) To what extent do non-academic soft skills play a role in securing internships for international students?
- 3) Do networking or social contacts play a more significant role than academic performance in securing internships for international students?
- 4) Is prior work experience a more significant factor than academic performance in securing internships for international students?
- 5) How effective are internet-based tools like LinkedIn in aiding international students in securing internships?
- 6) Do extracurricular activities during university significantly contribute to international students securing internships?

The research extends knowledge about positive internship outcomes and how teachers, career counselors, and employers can help international students achieve their career aims.

3. Materials and Methods

The method of this research is designed to analyze the impact of academic and non-academic factors on the internship success of international students at Rangsit University. The research has been conducted using both the qualitative approach (through interviews with seven employers, n=7) and quantitative approach (using data collected with a Google survey form). The survey was distributed to international students who have completed their studies and at least one internship, providing a sample of individuals with firsthand experience in professional settings. This approach generates insights into the relationship between academic performance (measured by GPA) and non-academic factors (such as soft skills, networking, and prior work experience) in achieving internship outcomes. The survey collected both demographic information and targeted data on specific variables, including GPA, prior work experience, involvement in extracurricular activities, networking efforts, and the use of online professional platforms.

This study proposes the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: International students with higher grades are more likely to incur less difficulty in securing an internship.

Hypothesis 2: Non-academic factors (such as soft skills including negotiability, leadership, responsibility, problem-solving, decisiveness, and the ability to work under pressure) play a more significant role than academic performance in securing internships.

Hypothesis 3: Networking or social contacts play a more significant role than academic performance in securing internships.

Hypothesis 4: Prior work experience plays a more significant role than academic performance in securing internships.



Hypothesis 5: Using internet-based tools such as LinkedIn, Fiverr, and Upwork is more likely to help in securing internships.

Hypothesis 6: Extracurricular activities at universities are more likely to help in securing internships.

These hypotheses will guide the analysis by examining the relative importance of academic and non-academic factors in predicting internship success among international students.

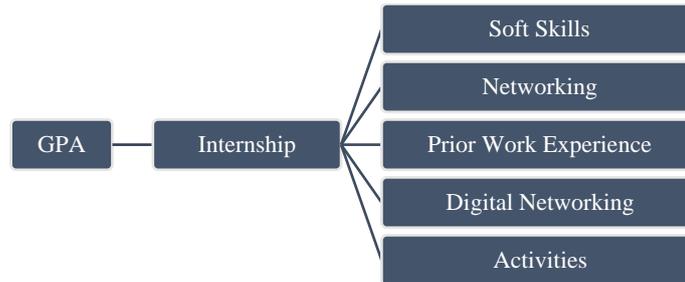


Figure 1 Conceptual framework of the research

4. Results and Discussion

The following findings are based on survey data from 40 students, and further analysis of industry insights was conducted through interviews with seven individuals (n=7), all of whom are thriving in their respective industries in Thailand. These include the HR Director of Mercedes-Benz Thailand, the HR head of Rangsit University, the HR director of a cooking oil company, the HR director of a digital marketing company, the HR manager of a fashion company, the HR director of an interior design company, and the HR manager of Cafe Amazon. The use of this combined qualitative and quantitative research design provides a more holistic picture of the predictors of success for interns today.

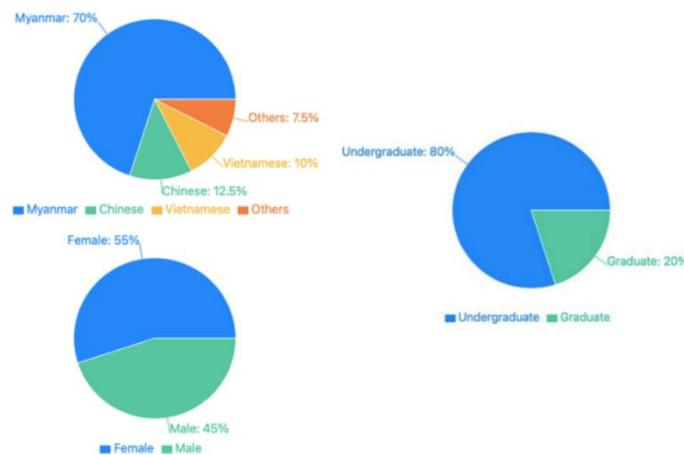


Figure 2 Combined student demographics

Demographic distribution of the students surveyed for the study (n=40) was as follows: A dominant majority of the students, 70%, are from Myanmar, 12.5% from China, 10% from Vietnam and the remaining 7.5% from other countries. Geographically, the distribution is even, and in terms of gender, there are more female respondents at 55% compared to male respondents at 45%. Most of these students (80%) are at undergraduate level, while 20% are at the postgraduate level. This diversity shows that student profile is



international, and preponderance of students with diverse academic backgrounds may influence the perceived success factors in internships.

Table 1 Student Sample Characteristics (n=40)

Characteristics	Distribution
GPA 3.1 – 4.0	85 %
Prior Work Experience	50%
Online Platform Usage	80%
Extracurricular Participation	52.5%

The student sample has a strong academic background, as 85 % respondents have GPAs ranging from 3.1 to 4.0. Half the sample reported having prior work experience, and 80% have used LinkedIn or similar professional networking websites, suggesting a receptiveness to the alteration of traditional career resources. Regarding extracurricular activities, 52.5% of students reported participation, which is considered moderate in terms of activities outside classroom learning. Altogether, these characteristics offer a panoramic view of a student body that is well-prepared academically as well as professionally.

Table 2 Employer Requirements by Sector (n=7)

Sector	Primary Requirements	Secondary Requirements
Corporate	Soft Skills (90%)	Technical (85%)
Retail/ F&B	Soft Skills (95%)	Experience (70%)
Service	Soft Skills (90%)	Technical (75%)
Education	Soft Skills (85%)	Experience (65%)

Employer expectations are high and vary from one sector to another. Soft competencies are heavily utilized in the retail and service sectors, at 95% and 90% respectively, while technical skills are ranked by the corporate sector at 85%. However, soft skills do not vary and are listed as the secondary preferred skill by candidates in all sectors, further confirming the proposed hypothesis. Thus, experience is deemed more important in the retail industry (70%) and education sector (65%); in other words, sectors that require direct interaction with clients or involve mentoring value practical work experience more highly.

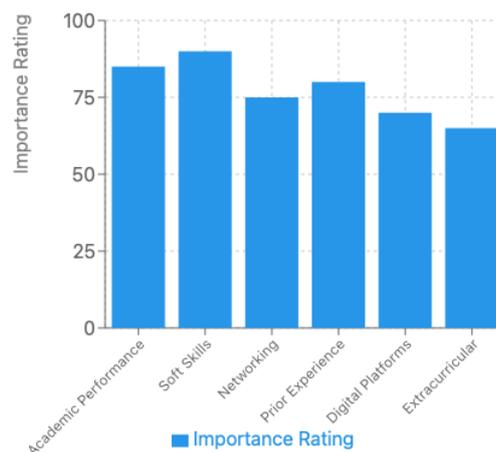


Figure 3 Key success factors rating

This visualization highlights attitudes that define the students' perspectives toward six aspects of success in internships. GPA attracted significant attention, as it is typical for the context of qualifications. In contrast, the self-assessed importance rating of soft skills, networking, and prior experience were similar, indicating that students value the practical and interpersonal dimensions of the course. Digital platforms and



extracurricular activities were valued slightly less, yet still importantly, which points to their increasing relevance in the contemporary work environment.

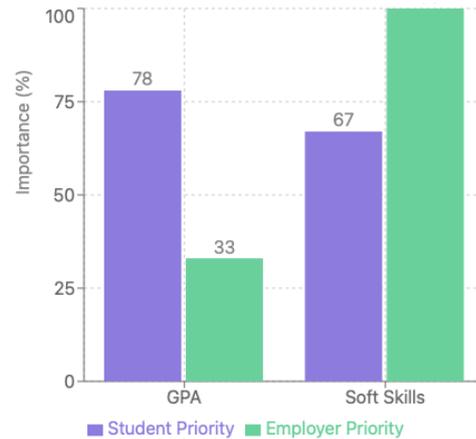


Figure 4 Student vs. employer priorities comparison

In figure 4, the results show a significant gap between students’ expectation and employers’ beliefs. Students focus 78% on GPA, while employers value it at only 33%, placing 100% emphasis on soft skills, whereas only 67% of students acknowledge soft skills as a factor. This misalignment indicates that there is an important aspect that students do not realize is a priority for employers. This revelation could be addressed through awareness programs or career guidance, so that students are better prepared for internships.

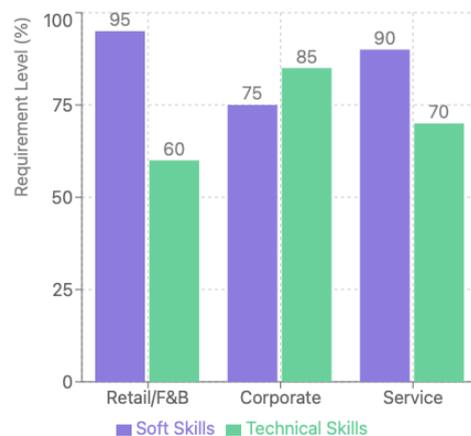


Figure 5 Industry sector distribution and requirements

As seen from the analysis of industry sectors, there are differences in the requirements presented by each sector. In retail/F&B, 95% of employers emphasize the importance of soft skills, with technical skills given less importance. In corporate sectors, technical competencies are highly valued by 85% of employers; however, soft competencies are also considered important by 80%. Similarly, in the service sector, soft skills are highly valued, with 90% emphasis. What emerges from these findings is that interpersonal skills are needed in all different sectors, based on results showing that while there may be sector-specific skills or experience requirements, interpersonal skills transcend all these sectors.

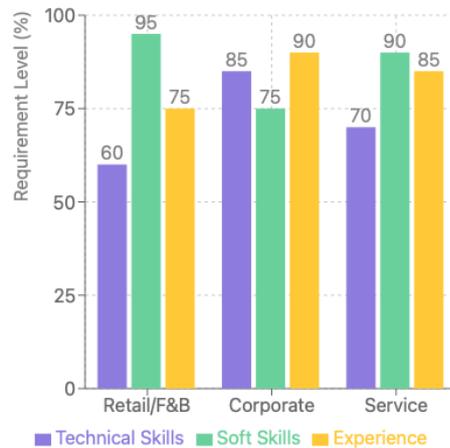


Figure 6 Skills requirements by sector

The distribution of skills required by sector, as shown in Figure 5, reveals nuanced differences. While soft skills dominate in retail and service sectors, the needs vary more distinctly when examined in detail. In sectors like retail, service, and education, soft skills are predominantly valued, whereas in corporate roles, a combination of technical and soft skills is required, with an emphasis of 85% on technical skills and 80% on soft skills. This indicates that students interested in corporate careers must possess strong technical skills, while those aiming for roles in service or retail should focus on enhancing their interpersonal skills. It is also evident that related experience is crucial in sectors such as retailing (70%), and education (65%).

The results provide clear evidence for rejecting the null hypothesis that internships are influenced primarily by academic background rather than other factors. This is particularly true for soft skills, which employers identified as crucial across all business area (Figure 2), often placing little emphasis on GPA. Networking and experience were also ranked highly, indicating that students need to develop practical and interpersonal skills (Figure 5, Table 3).

The data also partially supports the hypothesis that academic performance continues to play a role. Though GPA has not been rated highly by most employers, it remains important—especially when applying for jobs in a large company with a focus on technical backgrounds. This is not entirely unexpected, given that a similar pattern exists when comparing the perceived importance of GPA between students and employers, with the latter valuing it at half the rate of the former (Figure 3).

Finally, the findings support the hypothesis that specific sectors define intern success. Although soft skills were mentioned as the most important by all respondents from both the survey and interviews, technical skills were considered most relevant for corporate positions, while prior work experience was seen as most relevant in retail and educational settings (Figure 5, Table 3). This suggests that preparation should be tailored to the needs of the specific industry being targeted.

5. Conclusions

The internship experience is significant for international students, bridging the gap between theory and practice while enhancing job prospects after graduation. Academic performance is often used to assess potential hires, yet its direct correlation to internship success for international students is found to be limited.

While traditionally considered dependent on academic achievement, the current research demonstrates that internship success is more strongly influenced by soft skills such as networking and



experience. Employers value GPA less than students do. Intern success is shaped by sector-specific needs: technical skills for corporate positions, and prior experience for roles in retail and education.

Employers reward academic performance in areas like problem-solving, but some question its effectiveness as a precondition for international professional competence. While academic profiles provide a foundation, soft skills are key to internship success. Soft skills, networking, work experience, and extracurricular activities can be more impactful than academic achievements. Job seekers lacking essential skills like communication and teamwork may be less employable than those with strong academic records. Establishing networks, attending career fairs, and using platforms like LinkedIn, and student associations are found to be of significant importance for international students seeking internships.

These results underscore the importance of non-academic outcomes when entering the international student job market, which may require additional resources and time from students. Beliefs concerning success factors, as perceived by students and employers, are disparate (Figure 3), implying that universities and career centers now have an increasingly active role to play. Additionally, focusing on a student's sector of specialization requires specific strategies in internship preparation to meet the expectations of various industries.

This research corroborates the widely held belief that academic achievement is a central factor in securing internships, while also highlighting the importance of developing networking abilities and interpersonal skills. Furthermore, the data supports the relevance of academic performance in long-term career prospects, as employers continue to prioritize this factor. The university experience presents an advantageous environment for developing relevant soft skills, complementing the conventional hard skills provided by higher education.

The following are limitations of this research that were not addressed due to research constraints. First, the study was conducted over the course of a single semester—only four months—which limited the time available for data collection and analysis. As a result, the number of survey respondents, selected from students who had completed internships, and the interviews with HR professionals, were limited. This may reduce the generalizability of the results to the larger population beyond the study participants. Moreover, due to limited resources, the range of industries and participants that could be examined was also restricted.

However, if more professionals, resources, and time had been made available in this paper, it could have been more useful to all stakeholders, including students, educators, and industry practitioners. The key limitations identified are time constraints, subjectivity, and lack of adequate resources. These limitations inform future studies; they should incorporate a longer time frame to review sufficient research data and ensure the use of better resources.

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