

A Study on the Relationship Between Educational Internship and Employment of Chinese University Students: A Qualitative Analysis Based on Counsellors' Perspectives

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Abstract

University graduates are both an important pillar of the national talent strategy and key drivers of future development. With 11.79 million graduates in 2024, the employment landscape has become increasingly complex. Many students lack clear career goals, viewing internships as mere formalities or temporary tasks, which results in a mismatch between their academic training and real-world job demands (McGunagle & Zizka, 2018). Meanwhile, employers are seeking graduates with practical experience and clear vocational orientation. The gap between students' perceptions of educational internships and actual job market expectations contributes to unstable employment outcomes (Shanfari, 2024). Prior research has mainly focused on teaching effectiveness or curriculum content, with limited attention to how students' internship experiences shape their employment outlook. This study adopts a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews with counsellors at Hebei Minzu Normal University, aiming to explore how education internships influence students' job choices, professional identity, and career planning. It further analyzes the guidance strategies employed by counsellors to help students connect internship experiences with long-term career development and offers targeted suggestions to enhance the employment readiness of university students through practice-oriented support systems.

Key Words: educational internship, employment, university students, counsellors, qualitative research



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Introduction

In recent years, the employment of university graduates has become a focal point of public attention and academic research in China. With the continuous expansion of university enrolment and the ongoing transformation of the industrial structure, the employment

environment for college students is undergoing profound changes. In 2024, the number of university graduates in China reached an all-time high of 11.79 million, further intensifying the pressure on the job market (Ministry of Education, 2024). In this context, how to improve graduates' employability and guide them to form a rational and pragmatic outlook on employment has become a key issue for higher education institutions.

Among various strategies to improve employment outcomes, educational internship has been increasingly emphasized as an important bridge between academic study and professional practice. It not only provides students with opportunities to gain hands-on experience but also helps them understand industry demands, clarify career goals, and enhance job readiness (Tan et al, 2023). However, many students regard internship as a formality rather than a meaningful preparation for future employment, resulting in a weak link between internship experience and career planning (Wei et al., 2021).

At the same time, university counsellors play a crucial role in students' internship processes. They are not only responsible for internship coordination and student supervision but also serve as guides in helping students reflect on their experiences and align them with future career paths. However, few studies have investigated the role of counsellors in shaping students' understanding of educational internships and employment.

Therefore, this study takes Hebei Minzu Normal University as a case and adopts a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews with university counsellors. The aim is to explore how educational internships influence university students' employment outlook, how counsellors perceive and guide this process, and what institutional support is needed to enhance the employment effectiveness of internship experiences.

Research Objectives:

This study aims to investigate the relationship between educational internship experiences and the employment outlook of university students from the perspective of counsellors. The specific objectives are as follows:

1. To explore how university counsellors perceive the role of educational internships in shaping students' employment attitudes and career planning.
2. To identify the key factors during the internship process that influence students' employability and job-seeking behaviour.
3. To examine the guidance strategies counsellors use to help students connect internship experiences with employment outcomes.
4. To provide practical suggestions for enhancing the effectiveness of educational internships in improving the employment readiness of university students.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the relationship between educational internships and the employment outlook of university students from the perspective of

counsellors. Qualitative methods are particularly suitable for examining complex social phenomena, as they allow for an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and contextual factors.

Research Design

A semi-structured interview approach was employed to collect data from university counsellors at Hebei Minzu Normal University. Semi-structured interviews provide a balance between the flexibility of open-ended questions and the consistency of a guided framework, enabling researchers to explore specific topics while allowing participants to express their thoughts freely.

Participants

The study targeted counsellors who have direct experience supervising students during their educational internships and are involved in career guidance. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants who could provide rich, relevant, and diverse insights into the research questions. A total of six counsellors participated in the study.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted in a one-on-one setting, either face-to-face or via video conferencing platforms, based on the availability and preferences of the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes and was audio-recorded with the explicit consent of the participants. To ensure consistency across interviews, a structured interview guide was developed. This guide covered key topics, including counsellors' perceptions of educational internships, their role in guiding students, and the observed impacts of internships on students' employment outlook.

Data Analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis, a method that enables the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns (themes) within the data. This approach facilitated a comprehensive and nuanced interpretation of the participants' perspectives. The analysis adhered to the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (Peel, 2020), which includes the following stages: (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. This systematic process ensured that the analysis was rigorous, transparent, and reflective of the underlying patterns and insights within the data.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Hebei Minzu Normal University Ethics Committee. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured by assigning pseudonyms to participants and securely storing data in password-protected files.

Results

This study, based on interviews with six counsellors, delves into the various factors influencing university students' professional development through internships. It highlights the shifts in career cognition, the mismatch between internship content and workplace preparation, the counsellors' role as guides in career reflection and planning, and the external pressures affecting students' employment decisions. The findings are categorized into four key themes.

1. Internships as a Turning Point in Career Cognition

For many students, internships serve as a pivotal turning point in their career cognition, where they confront the gap between their idealistic perceptions and the reality of the workplace. Most students enter internships with an idealized vision of their chosen profession, only to find that the realities of the job differ significantly from their expectations. As a result, internships help students gain a clearer understanding of their own strengths, interests, and limitations.

One counselor shared, "We had a student who initially was passionate about becoming a teacher and believed it was her future, but after the internship, she realized she wasn't suited for that role. She eventually chose a completely different career path." This shift in career cognition is not viewed as a failure but as a valuable step in refining students' understanding of themselves and their career goals. Counselors emphasized that internships allow students to more clearly identify which careers align with their skills and interests and which ones they may not want to pursue, providing a solid foundation for future career decisions.

2. Mismatch Between Internship Content and Workplace Preparation

While internships provide students with initial exposure to the workplace, many students report that the content of their internships is not aligned with the skills and experiences they need for their future careers. In many cases, internships mainly involve administrative tasks or passive observation, lacking the hands-on challenges necessary to build core workplace skills. Counsellors also pointed out that the limited scope and lack of challenging tasks during internships hinder students' professional development and preparation for future employment. One counsellor specifically noted, "Some students spend their internships doing basic tasks like organizing files or observing other colleagues, which allows them to experience the work

environment but doesn't help them develop practical skills. If this continues, even after completing their internship, students will struggle to be competitive in the job market." This reveals a significant gap between current internship designs and the actual professional preparation required. To address this, counsellors suggested that internships should focus more on cultivating students' practical skills and should be better aligned with real-world industry needs, providing students with more challenging tasks to enhance their employability.

3. Counsellors as Guides in Reflection and Career Planning

In the process of students' career development, counsellors play a crucial role not only in managing internships but also in guiding students through the reflection process and helping them develop their career plans. Many counsellors believe that internships alone are insufficient for students to make informed career decisions. The key lies in how counsellors guide students in reflecting on their experiences, helping them derive meaningful insights from these experiences and align them with their future career goals.

One counsellor shared, "Students encounter various challenges and uncertainties during their internships, but some may feel lost when facing these difficulties. As counsellors, our responsibility goes beyond monitoring their internship performance; we need to help them link these experiences to their long-term career aspirations and guide them in reflecting on what they have learned." Through regular communication and feedback, counsellors help students understand the value of their internship experiences and integrate them with their future professional objectives. This guidance enables students to have a clearer sense of their career path, laying a solid foundation for their future employment decisions.

4. External Pressures Affecting Employment Decisions

In addition to personal interests and abilities, students' employment decisions are often heavily influenced by external pressures, such as family expectations, regional preferences, and economic realities. Many students, despite performing well in internships and discovering their passion for a particular career, ultimately choose a different path due to pressure from their families. Counsellors noted that family expectations often play a significant role in shaping students' career choices, sometimes even overriding their own career aspirations.

One counsellor provided an example, saying, "We had a student who performed exceptionally well during her teaching internship and really enjoyed the profession. However, due to her parents' opposition, she ultimately gave up her dream of becoming a teacher." Additionally, regional preferences also influence students' decisions. Many students, when faced with a choice between urban and rural job opportunities, tend to favour large cities due to the economic advantages and social appeal, neglecting their interests or professional direction. These external pressures complicate students' decision-making processes, often preventing them from making career choices based solely on their personal interests and internship experiences. In this context, counsellors not only help students identify and understand the impact of these external pressures but also encourage them to balance these influences with their internal career desires. One counsellor concluded, "When making

employment decisions, students cannot ignore the pressures from family, location, and finances, but our role as counsellors is to guide them toward finding a balance between these factors and their own career aspirations."

Discussion

Internships as Identity-Forming Experiences

Aligned with career construction theory (Wang & Li, 2024), this study confirms that internships often serve as pivotal moments in students' career development, acting as critical turning points that enable them to reflect on and reshape their career identities. Through direct exposure to the workplace environment, students are provided with an opportunity to reassess their aspirations, evaluate their skills, and confront their limitations in a real-world context. This is consistent with previous research, particularly Kolb's experiential learning theory (Morris, 2019), which posits that the process of learning through experience is essential for bridging the divide between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Internships offer students the chance to not only apply their academic learning but also to evaluate how their skills and aspirations align with the professional world, fostering a deeper understanding of their potential career paths.

However, the study also reveals that without structured guidance, these moments of self-reflection may not translate into tangible career decisions. While internships provide valuable opportunities for students to reflect on their professional identity, these reflections may remain superficial or disconnected from actionable plans if not facilitated by proper support systems. This highlights the critical role of counsellors in assisting students to integrate their experiences meaningfully. Counsellors act as mediators, helping students process their internship experiences in ways that enable them to align their personal values with professional goals. Without such guidance, students may struggle to connect their newfound insights to concrete career plans, ultimately undermining the potential benefits of the internship.

The role of counsellors, therefore, extends beyond providing emotional support or administrative oversight. They play a crucial part in encouraging reflective practices that empower students to make sense of their experiences and use them as steppingstones towards more informed and intentional career choices. By fostering an environment that encourages ongoing reflection and professional growth, counsellors help students navigate the complexities of the transition from education to employment. This process not only strengthens students' career identities but also prepares them to engage in meaningful career planning, making the internship experience a foundational component of their professional development.

In sum, while internships offer transformative opportunities for career identity formation, the depth and quality of these experiences are largely dependent on the guidance provided by counsellors. Their role in facilitating structured reflection is indispensable for helping students turn these experiences into actionable career decisions.

Structural Gaps in Internship Design

The data from this study reveals significant structural gaps within many internship programs, particularly in relation to the limited provision of substantial, task-based learning opportunities that are critical for developing the employability skills needed in the labour market. This finding resonates with the arguments put forth by Tu, Fangjing (2022), who emphasize that the quality of internships—rather than their duration or quantity—ultimately determines the long-term professional benefits for students. While many internships are available, many fail to offer meaningful, task-oriented activities that align with students' career aspirations and professional development needs. Instead, students often find themselves engaged in internships that are centered on menial administrative tasks or passive observation, neither of which adequately challenge them or equip them with the skills required to thrive in competitive job markets.

This gap between the internships intent and the actual experiences offered underscores a critical issue in the current internship model: many programs fail to provide students with authentic, hands-on learning opportunities that directly relate to their future career roles. As a result, students may complete their internships without gaining practical skills or industry-specific knowledge that are essential for securing employment upon graduation. Such limited engagement can diminish the value of internships as career development tools, potentially leading to disillusionment or under preparedness among graduates.

The findings also suggest that improving the depth and relevance of internship tasks is imperative, especially for students enrolled in application-oriented disciplines, where real-world experience and skill application are fundamental. To address this issue, universities and industry partners must take proactive steps to ensure that internship programs are not merely supplemental but integral to students' career preparation. Aligning internship tasks with current industry needs, incorporating problem-solving or project-based assignments, and fostering opportunities for direct engagement with industry professionals are critical for enhancing the quality of internships. These improvements would not only ensure that students gain the practical skills and competencies necessary for successful careers but also provide them with a more comprehensive understanding of the professional world.

Moreover, integrating regular feedback mechanisms into the internship structure would further enhance the value of these experiences. Counsellors, in collaboration with employers, could help students critically assess their roles within the internship, offering guidance on how to maximize the learning potential of the tasks at hand. By fostering deeper industry involvement and ensuring that internships are designed to be more than just observational, universities can better prepare their students for the challenges of the modern job market.

In summary, addressing the structural gaps in internship design is essential for improving the quality of career preparation offered through internships. By enhancing the depth and relevance of tasks, aligning them with industry standards, and creating opportunities for active, hands-on learning, universities can more effectively prepare students for professional success.

The Counsellor as a Career Facilitator

This study highlights the counsellor's dual role as both an emotional support figure and a strategic career facilitator, underscoring their critical contribution to students' professional identity formation and career planning. While traditionally perceived as logistical coordinators of internship programs, counsellors in fact serve as key mediators who interpret students' workplace experiences—particularly those that are ambiguous, complex, or emotionally challenging. Their involvement in the post-internship reflection process is especially vital, as it enables students to internalize experiential learning, transform it into meaningful insights, and integrate those insights into coherent career strategies.

These findings align with Huang et al. (2025) call to strengthen the career guidance capacity of student affairs professionals in Chinese higher education. Rather than remaining confined to administrative responsibilities, counsellors should be institutionally positioned as active contributors to students' long-term professional development. Their value lies not only in managing internships but also in framing these experiences within a broader developmental trajectory, thereby empowering students to navigate their evolving career landscapes with greater confidence and clarity.

In practice, counsellors play several indispensable roles. First, they facilitate structured reflection sessions that help students distil transferable skills, values, and competencies from fragmented or routine tasks, thereby enabling the transition from experience to strategy. Second, their ability to offer individualized guidance, which is attached to students' disciplinary backgrounds, personality traits, and developmental stages—ensures that career advice is both relevant and impactful. Third, as emotional anchors, counsellors provide psychological support when students encounter setbacks, uncertainty, or value dissonance during their internships, thus contributing to the development of professional resilience and adaptive capacity.

More fundamentally, the counsellor's function should be recognized and institutionalized as an integral part of the university's career education ecosystem. They act not only as “translators of experience” but also as “constructors of vocational discourse,” helping students build a sustainable and future-oriented career narrative. This requires not only professional training and institutional endorsement, but also structural resources that allow counsellors to engage more deeply with students throughout the internship cycle.

In sum, the counsellor's role as a career development facilitator is central to the transformation of internships from isolated activities into meaningful, identity-forming experiences. By guiding students through critical reflection and strategic decision-making, counsellors help them not only “see” who they are but also “become” who they aspire to be—an essential function in the evolving landscape of higher education and employment.

Social Expectations vs. Personal Aspirations

This study illuminates the persistent tension between external social expectations and students' internal career aspirations, revealing how familial influence, regional job market constraints, and broader sociocultural norms continue to shape and, in many cases, restrict students' employment trajectories. Despite the potentially transformative nature of internships, which

often provide students with clarity, confidence, and professional motivation—many are unable to translate these experiences into career outcomes that reflect their authentic interests due to external pressures.

Family expectations emerge as a particularly powerful and complex force. In contexts such as China, where collectivist cultural values and intergenerational responsibilities are deeply embedded, career decisions are often framed not solely as individual pursuits, but as family negotiations. Many students feel obligated to prioritize financial stability, proximity to home, or occupational prestige over personal fulfillment. This dynamic can result in a misalignment between the career insights gained through internships and the employment paths ultimately pursued, thus undermining the developmental potential of experiential learning.

These findings resonate with the broader literature on sociocultural constraints in career decision-making (Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018), which emphasizes the importance of contextual and relational factors in shaping individual agency. In this light, the role of the counsellor becomes both more complex and more critical. Counsellors are uniquely positioned to mediate between the student's emerging professional identity and the external expectations imposed upon them. This requires a high degree of cultural competence, emotional intelligence, and strategic communication.

To effectively support students, counsellors must adopt a dual approach: on the one hand, they should validate and acknowledge the legitimacy of familial concerns and social expectations; on the other, they must empower students to articulate and advocate for their own career interests. This process may involve facilitating open dialogue with family members, providing students with language to express their goals persuasively, or connecting students with role models who have successfully navigated similar tensions.

Moreover, the study suggests that sustained engagement—rather than one-time advising sessions—is essential. Career development is an evolving process, particularly in socioeconomically and culturally layered environments. Counsellors should therefore cultivate long-term relationships with students, offering continuous guidance that adapts to shifting personal and external circumstances.

In sum, while social pressures remain a formidable constraint on students' ability to fully capitalize on their internship experiences, the study underscores the transformative potential of culturally responsive, empathetic, and proactive counselling. By helping students negotiate the space between social conformity and personal authenticity, counsellors play a vital role in supporting more autonomous and meaningful career development pathways.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of internships and counsellors in shaping students' career decisions, it has several limitations. The research is based on data from a single university, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study relies solely on counsellor perspectives, without incorporating direct input from students, which could offer a more nuanced understanding of the internship experience. Future research could adopt a mixed-methods approach, integrating student narratives through interviews or surveys to better capture the student perspective. Furthermore, longitudinal studies tracking students'

employment outcomes over time could offer deeper insights into the long-term impacts of internships on career trajectories. Comparing internship models across different institutions, disciplines, and countries could also provide valuable information on how best to design internships that foster both personal and professional development.

Conclusion

This study highlights the often overlooked yet crucial role of educational internships in shaping students' employment outlook, particularly when supported by engaged and reflective counsellors. Internships, when thoughtfully designed and meaningfully supported, offer students invaluable opportunities to clarify their career goals, enhance job readiness, and cultivate stronger professional identities. However, the findings suggest that there is a pressing need for institutional improvements and comprehensive support systems to fully unlock the potential of internships. By reimagining internships not as isolated, standalone experiences but as integral components of a broader career development framework, universities can better equip graduates to navigate and thrive in an evolving labour market. This approach requires a shift in how internships are conceptualized and implemented, ensuring they provide students with the skills, insights, and confidence needed to succeed in their professional lives.

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