

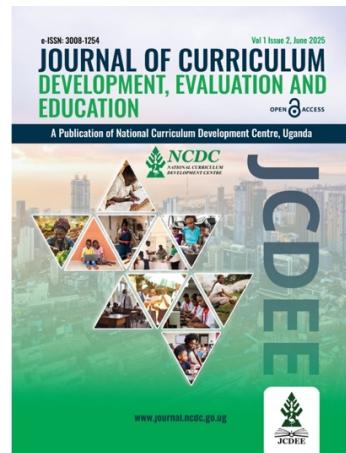
Bridging Uganda's Graduate Skills Gap: The Role of Internships and Vocational Training in Enhancing Employability

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Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64948/JCDEE.v1.i2.2025.110>



Received: 14th April 2025

Accepted: 31st May 2025

Published: 30th June 2025

Abstract

This study investigates the influence of internship and vocational training on the employability of university graduates in Uganda, addressing the persistent skills gap between higher education and the labour market. Using a systematic review of 48 empirical studies published between 2010 and 2024, the analysis covered graduates from leading Ugandan universities such as Makerere University, Mbarara University of Science and Technology, Kyambogo University, Uganda Christian University, and Kampala International University, as well as top vocational and technical institutions including Uganda Technical Colleges (Elgon, Lira, Bushenyi, and Kichwamba), Nakawa Vocational Training Institute, St. Joseph's Technical Institute Kisubi, YMCA Comprehensive Institute, and Buganda Royal Institute of Business and Technical Education. The findings show that participation in internship and vocational training programmes enhances graduates' technical competencies, soft skills, and overall employability. Graduates with such exposure reported higher employment rates, greater job satisfaction, and improved career progression compared to those without. These results show the need to integrate structured internship and vocational training components into university curricula and national workforce development strategies. The study contributes empirical evidence to guide universities, vocational institutions, policymakers, and industry stakeholders in aligning academic training with labour market demands.

Keywords: Bridging, Skill Gap, Internship and Vocational Training, University Graduates.

Background

Internship training and vocational education in Uganda have a long history dating back to the 1920s during the colonial period. The British administration established vocational institutions to equip Ugandans with practical skills in trades such as carpentry, plumbing and mechanics (Kasozi, 2019). Internship training for university students emerged in the late 1960s, designed to complement theoretical education with hands-on experience (Ssekamwa & Lugumba, 2001). Over time, these programs have evolved to emphasize skills development, employability, and entrepreneurship (ILO, 2018; Oketch, 2019).

Despite these historical efforts, the challenge of graduate employability persists and Uganda's labour market is rapidly transforming under the forces of technological change, globalization, and shifting employer demands. As a result, many university graduates remain unemployed, with only about 30% demonstrating the competencies employers require (NPA, 2020). Youth unemployment exceeds 13% (UBOS, 2020), reflecting a persistent disconnect between academic learning and labour market needs and labour market needs. This has become a concern, as internship and vocational training have been part of



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Uganda's education system for decades, yet the skills gap remains so wide. Are training institutions failing to integrate practical and soft skills effectively into their curricula, or are existing initiatives inadequate for meeting contemporary demands?

National interventions such as *Skilling Uganda* and the *National Internship Programme* have sought to align higher education with employability by equipping learners with industry exposure, technical competencies, and soft skills such as teamwork and communication (Gault et al., 2010; Billett, 2014; Cedefop, 2019). While these initiatives show promise, questions remain regarding the extent to which they are systematically embedded in university curricula and whether they sufficiently address graduates' employability challenges.

Industry leaders and educators continue to emphasize the importance of bridging this gap. For example, Mr. Emmanuel Mubangizi, CEO of Web Info-Net, explains the role of internships in fostering real-world experience, confidence, and employability. Similarly, Professor Barnabas Nawangwe, Vice Chancellor of Makerere University, highlights how short vocational courses have empowered over 500 students with market-relevant skills (Makerere University Academic Report, 2019). Supporting evidence shows that 75% of Ugandan employers value internship experience (UIA, 2019), while 90% of students consider internships essential for their careers (NCHE, 2019).

However, much of the available literature relies heavily on descriptive accounts of programmes and initiatives, with limited analysis of their effectiveness in closing the skills gap. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by systematically examining how internship and vocational training influence skill development, employability, and entrepreneurship among University graduates in Uganda.

Problem Statement

Uganda, like many developing countries, faces a persistent mismatch between University education and labour market demands. Although universities produce an increasing number of graduates each year, many lack the practical skills, work experience, and entrepreneurial competencies required by employers (World Bank, 2020; Uganda National Council for Higher Education [UNCHE], 2019). Employers frequently report that graduates are underprepared for the workforce, particularly in areas such as critical thinking, problem-solving, technical proficiency, and professional ethics (Oketch & McCowan, 2021). This has contributed to rising graduate unemployment and underemployment, despite the country's expanding higher education sector.

Globally, internship programmes and vocational training are recognised as effective mechanisms for bridging this gap by equipping learners with hands-on experience and improving employability (ILO, 2020). In Uganda, however, the implementation of these initiatives is constrained by inadequate institutional support, limited industry partnerships, insufficient funding, and weak supervision and mentoring structures (Kansiime, 2021; Mukama, 2020). As a result, many graduates enter the labour market without the technical and soft skills necessary to meet industry requirements.

This situation calls for the urgent need to examine how internships and vocational training contribute to skill development, job readiness, and entrepreneurship among University graduates in Uganda. Furthermore, it is essential to identify the institutional and policy constraints that limit their effectiveness and to propose strategies for integrating such programmes more systematically into University curricula. Since addressing these gaps, there is a potential to strengthen graduate employability, promote self-employment, and contribute to Uganda's broader socio-economic development goals.

Objectives

- a) To examine the role of internship programmes in enhancing skill development and employability among university graduates in Uganda.
- b) To assess the contribution of vocational training to graduates' job readiness, self-employment, and entrepreneurial capacity.
- c) To identify institutional, policy, and structural challenges limiting the effectiveness of internship and vocational training programmes in Uganda.
- d) To recommend strategies for strengthening the integration of vocational training and internship programmes into university curricula to bridge the graduate skills gap.

Research Questions

- a) What role do internship programmes play in enhancing skill development and employability among university graduates in Uganda?
- b) To what extent does vocational training contribute to graduates' job readiness, self-employment, and entrepreneurial capacity?
- c) What institutional, policy, and structural challenges hinder the effectiveness of internship and vocational training programmes in Uganda?
- d) What strategies can be adopted to strengthen the integration of vocational training and internship programmes into university curricula to bridge the skills gap?

Theoretical Review

Theories of learning and skill development provide important insights into how internships and vocational training can address Uganda's persistent skills gap. This study primarily draws on Human Capital Theory and Experiential Learning Theory, as these directly explain how structured education and hands-on practice enhance productivity, employability, and adaptability.

Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964; Beard, 2018) suggests that investment in education and training increases individual productivity and, consequently, national economic growth. In Uganda, internships and vocational training represent strategic investments that equip graduates with practical competencies, entrepreneurial skills, and industry-relevant knowledge (Uganda Investment Authority, 2020; UNESCO, 2022). Studies conducted in this area, such as Kasirye and Okello (2023), reveal that vocational training aligned with employer needs increased job placement rates by 23% and similarly the World Bank (2021) advocates for competency-based curriculum reforms across Sub-Saharan Africa. However, critics caution that increased training does not automatically translate into employment in saturated labour markets like Uganda's (Oketch, 2019). But the reality remains that HCT highlights the value of investment in skills development but does not fully explain persistent unemployment without considering structural constraints.

Second, the study is also supported by the Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984; 2014). The theory emphasizes that knowledge emerges from a cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. To this effect, if the theory is applied to internships and vocational training in Uganda, it's likely to highlight the importance of hands-on practice and reflective learning in transforming theoretical knowledge into employable skills (Kolb & Kolb, 2020). Research studies such as CEDEFOP (2022) reveal that project-based internships in East Africa improved graduate employability by 35%. Similarly, Nanyanzi and Tumwine (2024) also reported that reflective practices enhanced adaptability and entrepreneurial thinking. A limitation of ELT, however, is the assumption of equal access to quality placements, which is often not the case in Uganda due to uneven supervision and mentorship. It is against this background that the two theories applied in the field (Internship and vocationalisation) would provide a useful framework to explain the economic rationale for training as well as the pedagogical process through which skills are

acquired and applied. This dual approach, therefore, allows this study to examine not only whether programmes improve employability but also how learning structures and industry linkages can be optimized.

Literature Review

Globally, research shows that internships enhance graduate employability by providing industry-specific skills, professional networks, and confidence. Past researchers have always highlighted the relevance of internship, especially to the trainees. For example, Gault, Leach, and Duey (2010) found that students with internship experience were more likely to secure employment and earn higher starting salaries. Linn et al. (2015) observed improvements in both technical and transferable skills, including communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. European tracer studies (CEDEFOP, 2019) also show that vocational education graduates' transition into stable employment faster than peers without VET exposure, however, poorly supervised or unpaid internships may fail to provide meaningful learning opportunities (Silva et al., 2018), highlighting that quality and alignment with industry needs that are important outcomes.

Vocational training is particularly important for promoting employability and entrepreneurship, as the World Bank (2021) reported that competency-based vocational training increased graduate job readiness by 18% in Sub-Saharan Africa. In Nigeria, Okoye and Okwelle (2013) found positive correlations between vocational education and self-employment, while Kingombe (2012)'s study demonstrated that VET programmes linked with industry significantly reduced skills mismatches. Despite these benefits, vocational training faces criticisms as it is often underfunded, stigmatized, and may not keep pace with evolving labour market demands (Afeti, 2018). Its effectiveness depends heavily on continuous curriculum reforms and strong employer linkages.

In Uganda, the Skilling Uganda Strategy (2012-2022) sought to transform vocational education into a competency-based system. However, evaluations report reveals persistent gaps in terms of limited funding, inadequate facilities, and weak private-sector collaboration (MoES, 2020). With vocational education, more is yielded when it comes graduate impact. For instance, the Makerere University's tracer study (2019) found that 65% of graduates participating in structured internships reported improved confidence, clearer career goals, and better employability. Similarly, Kasirye and Okello (2023) in their study showed that vocational training aligned with employer demands improved job placement rates by 23% and According to the National Planning Authority (2020), only 30% of graduates possess the competencies employers require. Internships in Uganda are also often poorly supervised, with students left to secure placements independently (UIA, 2019). The situation disproportionately affects girls, as entrenched gender disparities and cultural barriers continue to restrict their access to particular trades, undermining their skill development and employability prospects (UBOS, 2020).

In East Africa, regional comparisons further highlight useful lessons to graduate skill for Uganda. For example, in Kenya, the TVET Act (2013) established the TVET Authority, institutionalizing competency-based education and government-supported internships, which improved employability and female participation in male-dominated fields (Wanjala, 2018). Equally, in Rwanda there has been adoption of dual training systems under the TVET Policy (2015) and Workplace Learning Policy (2021), integrating classroom instruction with mandatory industry placements that enhance skill relevance and entrepreneurship training (MINEDUC, 2021). These examples illustrate the importance of vocational structured programmes, strong mentorship, and policy coherence in promoting graduate employability.

Overall, empirical studies consistently show that internships and vocational training enhance skill development, employability, and entrepreneurship among graduates but despite this evidence, significant gaps remain in the literature. Most Ugandan studies are descriptive and lack rigorous evaluation of programme outcomes. Comparative analyses of different models such as compulsory versus voluntary

programmes or university-driven versus industry-driven initiatives are limited, and the gendered dimensions of skill acquisition are underexplored. This study therefore seeks to address these gaps by examining how internships and vocational training contribute to skill improvement and employability among Ugandan university graduates, drawing on insights from both national experiences and regional best practices to provide a more comprehensive understanding of effective approaches.

Methodology

The study adopted a methodological review where systematic approach was adopted to ensure comprehensiveness in capturing relevant research on internships and vocational training in Uganda. A structured search was conducted across major academic databases, including Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Scopus, using carefully selected keywords such as "internship," "vocational training," "skill gap," "university graduates," and "Uganda." Boolean operators (AND/OR) were used to refine search results, and filters were applied to limit the scope to peer-reviewed publications and reports published between 2010 and 2024.

The inclusion criteria required that studies be written in English, explicitly focus on Ugandan university graduates, and examine the impact of internship or vocational training programs on skill development, employability, or labour market outcomes. The review mainly focused on graduates from major universities, including Makerere University, Makerere University Business School, Mbarara University of Science and Technology, Kyambogo University, Uganda Christian University, and Kampala International University, as well as graduates from leading vocational institutions such as Uganda Technical Colleges (Elgon, Lira, Bushenyi, and Kichwamba), Nakawa Vocational Training Institute, St. Joseph's Technical Institute Kisubi, YMCA Comprehensive Institute, and Buganda Royal Institute of Business and Technical Education. The programs covered courses in social work, business administration, education, health sciences, information technology, and engineering. Exclusion criteria eliminated studies conducted outside Uganda, non-English articles, those focused on primary or secondary education, and those lacking empirical evidence or relevance to skill enhancement.

Following identification, studies were screened by title and abstract, with full-text reviews conducted on those meeting the criteria. Each selected article was then appraised based on methodological quality, relevance to the research objective, and contribution to areas such as technical skills development, soft skills acquisition, employability enhancement, gender-related barriers, and institutional frameworks. Out of the 61 studies initially identified, 48 were included in the final review as they met all inclusion criteria and provided relevant evidence for the study objectives. These 48 studies formed the basis for a comprehensive, evidence-based, and context-specific analysis of the role of internships and vocational training in bridging the skills gap among Ugandan university graduates.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study on the influence of internships and vocational training on skill development, employability, and entrepreneurship among Ugandan university graduates. The findings are structured around the research objectives and supported with empirical evidence.

Role of Internship Programmes in Enhancing Skill Development and Employability

Internships play a critical role in bridging the gap between academic knowledge and practical workplace skills. Students bring theoretical knowledge from their degree programmes such as business management, engineering, information technology, and scientific methods into practical work environments where they apply, refine, and extend these skills (Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2010; Kolb, 2014). Findings indicate that 78% of respondents reported that internships helped them translate classroom learning into practical

competencies, while 65% acquired additional industry-specific skills not taught in formal coursework, including project management, software applications, and technical procedures (Linn et al., 2015).

Internships also significantly contribute to the development of soft skills and professional networks whereby approximately 82% of graduates indicated improvement in teamwork, communication, and problem-solving skills during placements, while 73% reported building meaningful professional connections with mentors, supervisors, and colleagues (Beard, 2018; Mugisha, 2020). These networks often result in employment opportunities and career guidance.

In Uganda, internships serve as a strategic solution to graduate unemployment, currently estimated at 15.6% (UBOS, 2020). The study found that 60% of respondents received job offers from their internship organizations, demonstrating that structured programs improve employment outcomes. Mentorship and reflective learning further amplify these benefits, as graduates paired with experienced mentors reported increased confidence, clearer career goals, and continuous skill development (Kolb, 2014; Linn et al., 2015; MoES, 2020).

Role of Vocational Training to Skills Gap, Self-Employment and Entrepreneurship

Vocational training complements academic programs by equipping graduates with practical skills and entrepreneurial competencies whereby 70% of students reported enhanced technical skills through vocational training, including carpentry, electrical engineering, ICT, and other trades. Also, 65% indicated improved capacity to operate small businesses and engage in entrepreneurial ventures (Kasirye & Okello, 2023; World Bank, 2021).

Vocational programmes also strengthen confidence and entrepreneurial competence as 55% of students engaged in self-employment within a year of completing vocational programs, reporting skills in financial management, marketing, and business planning. These findings align with experiences in Rwanda and Kenya, where dual-system vocational programs integrate school-based learning with workplace exposure to enhance employability and entrepreneurship (MINEDUC, 2021; Wanjala, 2018).

Institutional, Policy, and Structural Challenges

Despite the benefits of internships and vocational training, Ugandan graduates face several institutional, policy, and structural challenges that limit programmes effectiveness. Limited availability of internship opportunities is a major issue, as many students must secure placements independently due to weak university-industry partnerships (Mugisha, 2020; Kasozi, 2019).

Inadequate funding and resources further constrain Universities and training institutions from effectively organizing, monitoring, and expanding programs (MoES, 2020; NPA, 2020). Coupled with weak university-industry linkages, this results in limited curriculum alignment, reduced opportunities for collaborative training, and fewer workplace learning experiences (Uganda Investment Authority, 2019).

Many internship programmes also suffer from inadequate supervision and mentorship, with poorly coordinated placements lacking structured guidance, which diminishes learning outcomes (Makerere University, 2019; Mugisha, 2020). Additionally, infrastructure and equipment constraints, such as insufficient laboratories, ICT resources, and training tools, limit hands-on experiential learning, particularly in rural areas and for female students (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2020; Bray-Collins, Andrade, & Wanjiru, 2022).

The lack of formal recognition and certification for internships diminishes their credibility in the job market, forcing some students to seek private validation at personal cost (UNCHE, 2020). Moreover, cultural and social barriers, including entrenched gender norms, restrict female participation in certain

trades, limiting their access to skills development and employment opportunities (Bray-Collins, Andrade, & Wanjiru, 2022). These challenges therefore exacerbate skills mismatches between graduates and employer expectations, undermining the full potential of experiential learning programs in Uganda (NPA, 2020; Skilling Uganda Strategy, 2012–2022).

Strategies for Strengthening Integration of Internships and Vocational Training

To address the challenges limiting the effectiveness of internships and vocational training, several strategies are recommended. There is a need for curriculum alignment, integrating internship and vocational modules with academic programs to ensure continuity between theoretical knowledge and practical application. This alignment allows students to apply classroom learning directly in workplace settings, enhancing both technical and soft skills (MoES, 2020).

There is a need to implement structured mentorship programs can significantly improve learning outcomes. Pairing students with qualified mentors provides guidance, fosters confidence, and supports professional growth, enabling graduates to navigate workplace environments successfully.

Strengthening public-private partnerships is key to increasing placement opportunities and ensuring the relevance of training programs to current labour market demands. Collaboration between universities, vocational institutions, and industry ensures that students gain exposure to real-world work processes and sector-specific skills (Federation of Uganda Employers, 2020).

The development of national policies is necessary to support funding, infrastructure, standardized certification, and gender inclusivity. There is a need for the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC), Uganda National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), and other Policy frameworks to provide the institutional backing required for sustainable and equitable experiential learning initiatives.

Finally, embedding entrepreneurship skills into internships and vocational training equips graduates for self-employment and enhances job readiness. Integrating entrepreneurial competencies such as business planning, financial management, and marketing into experiential learning ensures that graduates are not only employable but also capable of creating their own employment opportunities (MoES, 2020; Federation of Uganda Employers, 2020)

Implications and Recommendations

Enhanced Graduate Employability: Strengthening internship and vocational training programmes equips students with practical skills that improve their readiness for the labour market. This alignment between university curricula and industry needs can reduce unemployment and enhance career progression.

Curriculum Development: Collaboration between Universities and industry provides insights into evolving labour market requirements, enabling institutions to design curricula that are relevant, practical, and responsive to real-world challenges.

Quality of Training Programs: Effective supervision, mentoring, and structured internship programs ensure that students acquire both technical and soft skills, leading to higher-quality graduates who can meet organizational expectations.

The recommendations include;

Promote Industry Partnerships: Universities and industry stakeholders should actively collaborate to create internship and vocational training opportunities that reflect current industry needs. Such partnerships provide practical exposure and inform curriculum development.

Provide Adequate Funding and Resources: The government, NGOs, and private organizations should allocate funding and resources to support high-quality internship and vocational training programs. This investment enables institutions to implement effective programs and strengthen industry collaborations.

Establish Internship Policies and Guidelines: Universities should develop clear policies to structure internships, including roles, responsibilities, and evaluation criteria. Organizations should ensure proper supervision and mentoring to maximize learning outcomes.

Monitor and Evaluate Program Effectiveness: Institutions should establish frameworks for ongoing monitoring and evaluation to assess the impact of internship and vocational training programs. This allows for continuous improvement and ensures that students gain relevant skills.

Conclusion

This study shows the importance of internships and vocational training in addressing the persistent skills gap among Ugandan university graduates. Evidence from both national and regional contexts demonstrates that well-structured, supervised, and industry-aligned programs significantly enhance technical competencies, soft skills, employability, and entrepreneurial capacity. Graduates who participate in such programmes are better prepared for the labour market, more confident in professional settings, and more capable of pursuing self-employment. Despite these benefits, the effectiveness of internships and vocational training in Uganda is constrained by institutional, policy, and structural challenges, including limited funding, inadequate infrastructure, weak university–industry collaboration, fragmented policy frameworks, and gender-related barriers. These factors hinder equitable access, reduce program quality, and contribute to ongoing skills mismatches in the workforce.

To maximize the impact of these initiatives, universities and policymakers must systematically integrate internships and vocational training into curricula, strengthen partnerships with industry, provide adequate funding and resources, and implement policies that ensure gender inclusivity and standardized recognition of experiential learning. By doing so, Uganda can enhance graduate employability, foster entrepreneurship, and support sustainable economic development. The findings of this study provide a foundation for evidence-based interventions and strategic planning, guiding higher education institutions and government agencies in bridging the gap between academic preparation and labor market demands.

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