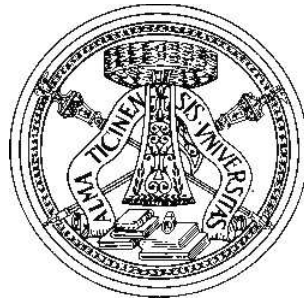


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**Internships in Italy: An Assessment of Capability
Expansion and Restriction**

Relatrice:

Chiar.mo Prof.ssa Enrica Chiappero-Martinetti

Correlatore:

Chiar.mo Prof. Michele Rostan

**Tesi di laurea di
Hannah Gudny Svelling
Matricola: 516988**

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¹ Italian for “uppercut” in boxing terms.

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Introduction

When you imagine an intern, what do you see? Perhaps, a cinematic scene; a young professional running around a city corner, attempting to answer two urgent calls, balancing six different coffees, holding tight their boss's dry cleaning, all while frantically trying to hail a taxi. They are managing everything all at once, alone. Or perhaps you imagine an internship differently. Instead, you envision a young professional in a suit who confidently presents a new and unique solution to their team. Their idea strongly resonates, they receive praise, and their hard work has paid off. In the end, they discover opportunities ahead of them that were otherwise unthinkable. Now, they begin the career of their dreams. These two instances, though strikingly different, capture the main reality surrounding internships: they are not uniform experiences. Instead, internships are complex, multifaceted environments constructed by a wide array of factors, from mentorship to workload, inclusion, and beyond. All of these make up the internship's work environment, which has the potential to be a catalyst towards professional development and progression – or not.

Italy is an especially compelling case for examining internship experiences. It is a country where the youth labor market has a seemingly paradoxical dynamic. On the one hand, according to the OECD, Italy has a relatively average rate of advanced educational attainment. While one might think that higher education comes with higher youth employment, this is not a direct consequence. Instead, Italy sees disproportionately high unemployment and NEET² rates. This demonstrates how Italy is a particular case: Italian youth are well-educated but lack robust youth employment. This matter then naturally stresses internships, as they are generally conceptualized as a bridge to the gap between education and employment. But given that the quality of internship environments may vary drastically, young professionals may not be afforded an equitable opportunity for entering the labor market.

Some may remark on their internship as simplistically being *good* or *bad* – but these characterizations do not highlight the complexity of internships as transitional moments. Internships may simultaneously present opportunities for skill development, professional networking, and career clarity, while also incubating risks of overworking, underpaying, and

² Not in Education, Employment, or Training

excluding the intern from proper development or inclusion. For example, an intern might benefit from impeccable mentorship, while being required to work excessive time beyond their contracted hours – and this may be seen as a successful internship in their eyes. Or, an intern may arrive with high motivation and relevant skills, but may encounter discrimination or social isolation, which may potentially restrict their capabilities and aspirations for their future. These nuances point to a gap in existing literature; that different factors of an internship may carry different weights in how the internship impacts the intern. And potentially, these factors may expand or restrict their capabilities and capacity to aspire for their future.

This thesis seeks to investigate this gap by examining internships in a different way. Instead of only considering them as stepping stones to employment, this thesis will research how they may act as environments with the potential to influence an intern's outcomes. Drawing on the Capability Approach, the Capacity to Aspire and the Value of Education, it investigates whether internships function as meaningful learning experiences that actually expand the capabilities and aspirations of young professionals in Italy. To do so, this thesis translates these theoretical concepts into a more operationalized form. This way, both qualitative and quantitative research can be conducted – gathering primary, secondary, and tertiary data – to produce a well-rounded insight into understanding how specific explanatory factors of internships relate to interns' capabilities and aspirations. Considering this, this thesis proceeds as follows: Chapter 1 introduces the theoretical framework, Chapter 2 outlines how the theory is operationalized for research purposes, Chapter 3 presents the methodological approach, and Chapter 4 introduces and analyzes the empirical findings.

Chapter 1: Theory Literature Review

1.1 Human Capital Theory

Human Capital, a foundational concept in mainstream economics, is commonly defined as the aggregate of knowledge, skills, and competencies that increase one's productivity. More specifically, it refers to an individual's educational attainment, knowledge, experience, and skills, as these characteristics are expected to enhance economic output (Ross and Rasura, 2025). In the end, the key focus is on the output of economic productivity and efficiency.

This concept has been introduced by economists such as Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz. While foundational to economic understandings of the value of education, it remains analytically limited. Regarding education, Human Capital Theory (HCT) frames it through a utilitarian lens, treating it as an investment that produces outputs such as enhanced productivity and wages. Ingrid Robeyns offers a more complex discussion of the HCT by incorporating it with the lens of the capability approach perspective in her publication "Three models of education: Rights, capabilities and human capital". She further contrasts HCT with two other evaluative models: rights-based discourses and the Capability Approach (Robeyns 2006).

For example, consider a young person who initially has a job paying 10 euros an hour. Then, after receiving their degree, this person receives 30 euros per hour. The Human Capital Theory interprets that this wage increase is evidence of successful skill acquisition and productive investment by means of educational investment. While this investment may be considered one with positive returns through the HCT, the labor market does not necessarily *acknowledge* this investment and the corresponding returns in terms of higher wages. Similarly, Human Capital Theory does not account for other externalities that are unrelated to non-economic outcomes, such as fulfillment, alignment with personal goals, well-being, or values. Wage gains may accompany externalities that either enrich or undermine one's life, yet these outcomes fall outside of the Human Capital Theory's conceptual reach.

On the matter of investment of education, George Psacharopoulos and Harry Antony Patrinos specifically highlight the returns of investment in education through the HCT. In considering the rate of return on the investment in education, they declare:

It is a summary of the costs and benefits of the investment incurred at different points in time, and it is expressed in an annual (percentage) yield, like that quoted for savings accounts or government bonds. Returns on investment in education based on human capital theory have been estimated since the late 1950s. Human capital theory puts forward the concept that investments in education increase future productivity (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos 2018).

While they discuss this matter in their World Bank publication, in short, the above excerpt demonstrates the analytical perspective of the HCT, especially as they continue to show a positive rate of return of the investment in education.

To further consider HCT, Robeyns emphasizes that while Human Capital is analytically useful for understanding labor market outcomes, it largely overlooks intrinsic and non-economic aspects of education. These aspects of education, in a larger scope, merit consideration. It captures labor market outcomes, but pays no attention to personal development, flourishing, or agency - factors which one may argue are important for finding a satisfying career. Rights-based discourse is another means through which one can justify investment in education, discussing it as a human right embodied in policy, but justifying based on rights discourse risks being overly rhetorical and wouldn't necessarily guarantee meaningful learning.

For this thesis, Human Capital Theory is a necessary but insufficient lens on its own. Its economic insights help clarify how education functions instrumentally, but its limitations require complementary theoretical frameworks that capture social, aspirational, and personal dimensions. Instead of rejecting Human Capital Theory, this thesis incorporates it into a mosaic with other pertinent theories - particularly the Value of Education, the Capability Approach, and the Capacity to Aspire - to address the multidimensional nature of the contemporary transition from higher education to the workforce.

1.2 Value of Education

Connecting with Human Capital Theory, Chiappero-Martinetti and Sabadash (2014) concur that Human Capital Theory measures education as an input-output investment, in terms of wages and productivity, in relevance to education. However, their Value of Education Orientation expands on this construct, which is intrinsic, instrumental, personal, and collective. This framework shows that the Human Capital and Capability Approaches should not be opposed to

each other. Instead, they may be integrated because Human Capital embodies economic returns, while the Capability Approach reveals why education and internships do not automatically generate real freedoms for personal development. They assert that education should be valued both intrinsically, as it contributes to individual well-being and societal progress: “this chapter argues for the need to improve our ability to estimate and evaluate the gains derived from education by extending the range of variables taken into consideration and moving towards a broader vision of well-being” (Chiappero-Martinetti and Sabadash, 2014: 227). Whereas economic modeling focuses on quantifiable inputs and outputs, such as wages and productivity, the Value of Education Framework draws attention to the less tangible but meaningful outcomes.

The author’s argument that education should be seen as both intrinsically and instrumentally value is key. In the context of education, the by-products tend to be positive: less risky behavior, satisfaction, and an enriched internal world (Chiappero-Martinetti and Sabadash 2014). This is ultimately why it is important to understand the value of education in a more complex sense. These additional dimensions are particularly relevant for understanding graduates entering the job market, where personal development and reflective capacities often shape both career pathways and long-term wellbeing.

Another prime takeaway of the contributions from the Value of Education is their synthesis of Human Capital Theory and the Capability Approach, showing how they respectively contribute to the idea that education is both economically instrumental, as it’s used for wage increases, and is intrinsically valuable, as it provides a personal, humanistic benefit for the student.

In the end, the Value of Education is an imperative theory in this theoretical framework, as it is a conceptual bridge for the multidimensional element of education. It transitions the discussion from purely economic understandings of education toward multidimensional and freedom-centered frameworks. It also lays the groundwork for analyzing internships not *just as* educational experiences or a steppingstone towards entering the labor market, but also as experiences with effects on personal development, aspirations, and real freedoms.

1.3 The Capability Approach

The Capability Approach, introduced by Amartya Sen and further developed by Martha Nussbaum, shifts analytical attention from economic outputs to substantive freedoms. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy summarizes the Capability Approach as follows:

The capability approach is a theoretical framework that entails two normative claims: first, the claim that the freedom to achieve well-being is of primary moral importance and, second, that well-being should be understood in terms of people's capabilities and functionings. Capabilities are the doings and beings that people can achieve if they so choose – their opportunity to do or be such things as being well-nourished, getting married, being educated, and travelling; functionings are capabilities that have been realized (Robeyns and Byskov "The Capability Approach")

Applied to higher education and internships, the Capability Approach acts as a powerful lens for analyzing their value. For example, if one lives in a town with limited opportunities or is impoverished, pursuing an advanced degree may expand their capabilities by developing professional skills or other capabilities. These capabilities, in return, allow access to broader labor markets and greater physical or social mobility. The resulting states of being - such as a stable income, meaningful work, or personal autonomy - are the functionings that individuals may value. In this sense, advanced education is a catalyst for realizing personally meaningful ambitions.

Complementing Human Capital Theory, which prioritizes productivity and wage outcomes, the Capability Approach prioritizes the focus on agency, dignity, and autonomy. A work experience may satisfy Human Capital Theory standards while undermining wellbeing if it contradicts the Capability Approach, including but not limited to compromises of health, violation of personal values, or restrictions of freedoms or choice. The Capability Approach, therefore, emphasizes human-centered analysis of labor market entry, asking what individuals genuinely value for their livelihood, and how education enables them to pursue those values.

1.4 The Capacity to Aspire

Appadurai's Capacity to Aspire extends capability-based thinking by emphasizing the cultural and positional factors that shape one's ability to formulate and pursue long-term goals.

Originally formulated in the context of poverty, the Capacity to Aspire theory highlights that aspirations are not evenly distributed. In fact, they are cultivated through exposure, resources, and socialization (Appadurai 2004).

The Capacity to Aspire also complements the Capability Approach. The Capability Approach focuses on what individuals are free to do with the capabilities they may develop or gain to realize their functionings. On the other hand, the Capacity to Aspire addresses what individuals can *imagine* themselves doing, and the pathway or steps needed to overcome to get there. This distinction is crucial for graduates entering competitive labor markets. Two students with the same degrees and qualifications may have significantly different abilities to conceptualize the possibilities ahead of them, to map out the pathway and potential challenges to get there, or to pursue an ambitious career, depending on cultural capital, networks, and prior exposure. The Capacity to Aspire highlights the influence that one's culture and outside influences have on their ability to imagine success in any specific career direction.

Crucially, Appadurai frames the Capacity to Aspire not only as a means of envisioning one's goals, but as a resource for navigation. For example, one's ability to map and plan their desired pathway, to anticipate challenges ahead, and to actively pursue each step on the pathway are all factors necessary for one to realize their own aspirations. Aspirations are therefore cumulative, shaped by previous experiences, access to knowledge, and cultural exposure to opportunities.

Consider two recent graduates who aspire to become diplomats. One comes from an elite background with family networks in foreign service, and one from a low-income background with limited exposure to such professions. The recent graduate from an elite background has a stronger capacity to aspire because they can more easily visualize the steps needed to reach their goals, such as where to find the right job postings, who to network with, and identify relevant networks and resources. This is where internships become a particular point of interest: they can act as potential gateways into highly selective fields. Internships can act as pivotal experiences in this process: programs that expand capabilities and provide mentorship or exposure can strengthen aspirational horizons, while programs that restrict capabilities may narrow aspirational horizons.

1.5 Gaps in the Literature

Together, the Human Capital Theory, Value of Education, Capability Approach, and the Capacity to Aspire form a multidimensional theoretical mosaic for analyzing the transition from higher education to entering the workforce. Applied to internships, this theoretical mosaic captures economic, developmental, cultural, and aspirational dimensions that jointly shape career and life trajectories.

While internships have been widely discussed as a means to gain experience or as sources of low-cost labor, there remains an opportunity for further discussion of understanding internships as capability-expanding or capability-restricting experiences. Existing literature exists to benefit from further analysis of how internships shape freedoms, agency, or long-term directionality.

The secondary gap, one which, for the intents and purposes of this thesis, will not be addressed, is the causal relationship of the capacities across one's lifetime. One may measure the immediate impact of an internship - for example, employment discouragement or the beginning of one's career - but it would be too complex and without clear results to attempt to understand the impact through time.

And finally, the third gap is understanding employer motivations and evaluative criteria regarding internships. Without access to confidential internal HR data, the literature cannot fully account for how employers perceive internship programs or interns' developmental trajectories, beyond applying traditional economic assumptions, such as cost minimization. Consequently, analyses of internships often rely solely on student or structural perspectives.

In the end, this theoretical landscape justifies the need for a multidimensional evaluation of internships - one that integrates economic, developmental, and aspirational dimensions to reveal when and how internships expand or contract capabilities for graduates transitioning into the workforce.

Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework

2.1 Introduction and Research Question

In the previous chapter, the theoretical foundations of this thesis were established, drawing on the Capability Approach and related frameworks to understand education and work as spaces that can expand or restrict individual freedoms. This chapter builds on that foundation by introducing a conceptual framework that will guide the empirical analysis. It will synthesize the literature discussed and will translate it into a structured model, through which internship experiences can be carefully examined.

To prepare for this transition from theory to empirical analysis, this chapter first develops a series of working definitions for the key concepts underpinning the study. These definitions establish a shared analytical basis for interpreting the data and clarify how internship experiences will be evaluated in relation to capability expansion or restriction. In doing so, Chapter 2 lays the groundwork for testing the primary research question:

Which factors within internship experiences, particularly those in the case of Italy, most significantly influence young people's capabilities and capacity to aspire, and how do these experiences influence, shape, or impact their early career trajectories?

To further clarify, the objective of this framework and further research is not to argue in support or against internships in Italy, but rather to specifically identify and analyze which mechanisms through internship experience produce distinct outcomes. By moving from the foundations of theory to a more clearly defined analytical lens, this chapter establishes a structure that ties together theory with empirical analysis, which will ultimately result in an analysis of data to answer the main research question. I now introduce the first building block of the analysis: the working definitions.

Additionally, drawing on the Capability Approach, literature from Bueno (Bueno 2022) (Bueno 2017), the Capacity to Aspire (Appadurai), the Value of Education (Chiappero-Martinetti and Sabadash 2014), this is where I further identify the key conversion factors that ultimately impact whether an internship expands the capabilities and aspirations of an intern, or restricts them. These factors can be broadly grouped into two categories: personal and environmental. Regarding the personal conversion factors, these may include the intern's prior skills, overall well-being, motivation, and aptitudes. These characteristics shape how individuals interpret and navigate the same internship experience, leading to different outcomes. On the other hand, environmental conversion factors relate to the structure and quality of the internship itself.

Particularly interesting dimensions of environmental conversion factors include the level and quality of supervision and guidance, level of autonomy, workload, clarity of tasks and expectations, ethical standards and potential misconduct, opportunities for skill development, networking, and career progression. It is also of significance to note that these environmental conditions do not exist in isolation; they may also feed the personal factors, shaping interns' psychological safety, sense of inclusion, and, in some cases, experiences of stress or burnout.

2.2 Significance and Secondary Expectations

The significance of this thesis is well captured by O'Connor and Bodicoat: "The massification of higher education, a simultaneous shrinkage of the graduate labor market and an increasing neo-liberal emphasis on students to improve their own employability makes the transition to employment a complex one" (O'Connor and Bodicoat 446). In other words, as advanced degrees become more common while demand for such qualifications does not increase proportionally, and as students are increasingly tasked with proving their employability, interns may experience a sense of limited agency and power. It thus becomes, even if one has a motivation and interest in gaining skills and experience, a challenging moment for graduates to find their way into the labor market.

The primary aim of this research is to highlight the most important conversion factors of internships and how they may impact an intern's capabilities and aspirations at the start of their career. Secondary expectations, however, regard the broader environment in which these internships occur. More specifically, the secondary expectation is to reveal if internships are truly an opportunity for an educational work experience, or rather, cheap labor in lieu of entry-level jobs. On the one hand, internships can serve as entry-level opportunities, allowing students to gain experience, develop skills, and begin the transition to full-time employment. On the other hand, given possible economic incentives, companies may offer low-paid or unpaid internships while reaping the benefits of a highly educated worker, treating interns as cheap labor rather than investing in their development. This dynamic indicates the possible precarious nature of internships.

This study also considers internships within the broader Italian labor market. Italy faces challenges like skill mismatch, overeducation, and brain drain. While addressing the full scope of these larger environmental issues requires further research beyond this thesis, examining

internships can provide insight into how early-career experiences may exist in this context. And perhaps, in the end, studying internships in the case of Italy may produce results which could inform policy or internship standard changes.

2.3 Working Definitions and Key Concepts

The following working definitions and highlighted key concepts will essentially aid in establishing a clear analytical foundation, as they allow for conceptual precision – important for the analysis. Given that internships exist in a wide range of types, formats, and contexts, the definitions and concepts will bring coherence. The definitions outlined here draw directly from the theoretical foundations built in the previous chapter, especially those that pertain to the Capability Approach, Capacity to Aspire, and the Value of education. The definitions here reflect work already highlighted as pertinent to, under the Capability Approach, what factors or contexts are of analytical significance – for example, matters of collective action (Von Jacobi et al. 2024), a proactive student nature and mentoring (Liu and Xu 2025), and overall support the consideration of the arguably underappreciated “‘by-products’ of learning”, as in the Value of Education (Chiappero-Martinetti & Sabadash 2014), and underlining the rights, capabilities and human capital (Robeyns 2006). In addition, great consideration was given to contemporary literature on the state of internships in Italy, particularly that of Arcidiacono (Arcidiacono 2015), Caroleo & Pastore (Caroleo and Pastore 2018), and Binelli (Binelli 2019). Again, it is essential to consider both elements regarding factors and environmental contexts, as they both contribute to the impact on the outcomes of an internship. And again, this logic, working definitions, and conceptual framework are all considered through the lens of emphasizing capability-enhancing work; as work is not simply about wages earned, but rather maximizing the human-centered return on the rhetorical question of what one should do with their own life, as emphasized as a whole by Nicholas Bueno (Bueno 2022).

Therefore, considering the conceptual foundation, the following working definitions may be put into two categories; those that elaborate on the nature of the internship and its experience, and those that elaborate on the wider environment of which the internship *exists in*. For example, the working definitions for capability, functionings, capability expansion, capability restriction, conversion factors, conversion rates and internships all pertain directly to the internship experience in and of itself. On the other hand, the working definitions and concepts of

psychological contracts, precarious work, overeducation, *La Gavetta*, responsabilization, and hypermobility may apply to external environmental conditions that may impact the internship experience. It is important to note that not *every* environmental factor will impact *each* intern's experience universally, but rather they are substantive enough to be considered within context.

2.3.1 Capabilities

To put it succinctly: “Capabilities are real freedoms or real opportunities, which do not refer to access to resources or opportunities for certain levels of satisfaction” (Robeyns 2017: 39). For this thesis, it is important to note that capabilities, freedoms, and opportunities are holistically virtuous objectives to strive for, as increased capability improves a person's livelihood. Arguably, this is why many pursue higher education: to increase their capabilities and scope of possibilities. It brings us back to the core purpose of this thesis, which is analyzing internships as educational possibilities, to see how and if this brings us to whether internships, specifically those in Italy, act as mechanisms that expand one's capabilities, or the inverse – restrict them.

2.3.2 Functionings

As described by Robeyns, “Human functionings are those beings and doings that constitute human life and that are central to our understandings of ourselves as human beings” (Robeyns 2017: 39). Not to be confused with capabilities, functionings are the result of one having freedoms and opportunities, and what one achieves with those freedoms (Robeyns 2017: 39). For example, traveling is a functioning. In terms of the labor market, one may consider having enough money from one's job to sustain themselves as a functioning. Many may exist among the workforce, as will be discussed later in the analysis.

2.3.3 Conversion Factors

While conversion factors will be discussed more at length in consideration of the conceptual framework, here they will be briefly reviewed in their essence. As noted in Robeyn's discussion of Sen's Capability Approach, she notes that conversion factors are “the factors which determine the degree to which a person can transform a resource into a functioning. This has been an important idea in Amartya Sen's version of the capability approach (Sen 1992a, 19–21, 26–30, 37–38) and for those scholars influenced by his writings” (Robeyns 2017: 45) She references the example of a bike: “We are interested in a bike not primarily because it is an

object made from certain materials with a specific shape and colour, but because it can take us to places where we want to go, and in a faster way than if we were walking. These characteristics of a good or commodity enable or contribute to a functioning” (Robeyns, 2017: 45). When one takes this metaphor of a bike and understands it to arrive at a certain “destination” per se, it may be theoretically transferred to the concept of internships. One may witness to many conversion factors while experiencing an internship; for example, if one feels included and socially cohesive with the team, that may be a conversion factor within the experience. This will be discussed at length in the discussion and analysis of research findings. For now, it is important that one considers the conversion factors as important moments or elements that provide the potential to arrive to a desired goal.

2.3.4 Conversion Rates

In the specific case of this thesis’s scope of focusing on the factors that most impact the results of an internship experience, conversion rates are even more significant than conversion factors to highlight. As defined by Chiappero, Salardi and Scervini, “conversion factors combine and interact with each other, and the joint effect of resources and conversion factors in the production of achievements” (Chiappero et al. 2018: 232-233). To further highlight the nature of the interaction between conversion factors, they give this example:

For instance, being a woman, or disabled, or belonging to a minority ethnic group does not automatically mean that one is disadvantaged, even if there may be a higher concentration of disadvantaged people in these groups. Rather, it is the interaction between these personal characteristics and other external factors – including family socioeconomic background, geographical location, cultural norms, and institutional factors – that will contribute to exacerbating or reducing inequalities (Chiappero et al. 2018: 233).

In other words, conversion rates underline the nature that conversion factors may not exist in a vacuum; rather, they interact, impact each other, and ultimately combine to create a unique result of achievement, or lack thereof.

Applying the notion of conversion factors to internships emphasizes that different interns will have different experiences under the same environmental conditions. For example, an intern who is capable, willing to work hard, interested in growing, and has relevant skills may thrive

within an internship environment's context that has conversion factors such as high-quality mentorship, a welcoming environment, autonomy to complete tasks, and so on and so forth. However, the same intern may have a poor outcome with an environment where these conditions are lacking, or where there may be misconduct or hostility, for example. On the other hand, an intern who is not interested in expanding their skills, does not have the proper skillset, and finds themselves not to be motivated or driven, may never reap the benefits of an internship with the most supportive and high-quality internship context. Or an intern who has a disability – which may not in and of itself be a disadvantage – may struggle to find personal success within an internship experience if the environment inhibits progress and capability expansion.

2.3.5 Capability Expansion vs Capability Restriction

Capability expansion, based in the theory of Sen and Robeyns, happens when an individual increases the range of real opportunities available to themselves, equipping themselves with additional skills, confidence, networks, or clarity that allow them to move closer to their self-defined goals and aspirations. In the context of an internship, capability expansion may take many forms. For example, consider an intern who aspires to pursue a research career, and during their internship, they make a research error. Rather than discouraging them, conditions that expand one's capabilities create a learning opportunity that refines their capabilities and may make them even more interested in this field their interest in the field.

Capability restriction is then, naturally, the opposite – it occurs when an experience reduces an individual's perceived or real opportunities to pursue valued goals. Using the same example, imagine the intern makes the identical mistake, but instead is in an internship environment that is not psychologically safe, or the intern perhaps has not received quality feedback to help them improve. Instead of viewing the mistake as a part of professional growth, the intern may instead internalize viewing themselves as incompetent, or even incapable. Over time, this may erode confidence, restrict perceived career possibilities, or weaken their aspiration to continue in their given field. In this case, the internship does not merely fail to expand capabilities. Instead, it actively restricts them. This distinction is central to the analytical framework of the thesis: the same structural setting of an internship may function as a site of growth or as a site of restriction, depending on the quality of its conversion factors.

2.3.6 Internship

To establish clarity for this thesis, it is important to define what is meant by an “internship”. The Cambridge dictionary has a few definitions for the same term:

1. a period of time during which someone works for a company or organization in order to get experience of a particular type of work,
2. a period of time spent receiving or completing training at a job as a part of becoming qualified to do it,
3. a period of time during which a student works for a company or organization in order to get experience of a particular type of work” (“Internship” 2025).

These definitions emphasize different aspects of internships, including gaining practical experience, acquiring skills, and continuing one’s education. For the sake of this thesis, the working definition may be considered as: an educational work experience which allows someone, possibly a student, to garner skills in preparation for professional work.

This definition highlights the dual nature of internships: they are both educational and professional work experiences. Many advanced degrees require internships as a part of graduation, making them contractual and educational in nature. Other internships are often undertaken by recent graduates or individuals outside of a formal academic space, in which case the internship functions primarily as a segue to professional work.

Regardless of formal affiliation, internships typically occur early in one’s career and serve as a bridge to the workforce, as there is often a gap directly between education and a full-time working position. From the Human Capital perspective, internships may contribute to skill acquisition, increased earning potential, and career mobility. The Capability Approach lens emphasizes that internships shape the opportunities available for interns and their future.

2.3.7 Precarious Work

When consulting the definition of precarity in the Cambridge Dictionary, it is defined as “the state of being uncertain or likely to get worse | a situation in which someone’s job or career is always in danger of being lost” (“Precarity” 2025). In this sense, precarity is directly connected with certain conditions in the labor market. To elaborate further:

“Precarious work affects adverse health and well-being through three main pathways [9]. First, precarious work exposes workers to harmful and unsafe working conditions endangering their physical health. Second, precarious work may limit workers’ control over their professional and personal lives, leading to psychosocial stress. Finally, some of the most critical consequences of precarious work are social and economic deprivation, affecting overall well-being” (Bhattacharya & Ray “Precarious Work”).

Defining precarious work is important because it highlights the significance of this thesis. Through the conceptual framework, based on the Capability Approach, Capacity to Aspire, and even Human Capital, the literature underlines the benefits of a person being to pursue what they want for their life. In contrast, precarious work goes against this principle. Precarious work can go against the ideals set by the Capability Approach and the Capacity to Aspire; it can be physically, psychologically, and emotionally harmful. As the quote above demonstrates, precarious work may negatively impact autonomy while also undermining well-being.

This lens of precarity is particularly useful for this thesis. The primary interest is to determine the conversion factors among internships that expand or restrict an intern’s capabilities and aspirations. By considering internships as a possible moment of precarious work – representing the opposite of capacity expansion – this lens may identify when internship experiences restrict capabilities rather than expanding them.

2.3.8 Overeducation

Another factor pertinent to studying the contextual case of internships in Italy is that of overeducation. To highlight this issue, in their publication analyzing AlmaLaurea data in Italy, Caroleo and Pastore note, “Despite the recent dramatic rise in the supply of graduates in the youngest cohorts (25–34 years old) from just over 10% to about 24% in the last two decades, both the supply of and the demand for skills remain lower in Italy than the EU average” (OECD qtd in Caroleo and Pastore 1000). This highlights a unique problem for Italy: lower than average demand for skills, *despite* increased education. The journal cites that within Italy, there is a specific issue of overeducation, overskilling, and educational mismatch (Caroleo and Pastore 999), which reflects the greater European trend of increased education not aligning with work opportunities (Cultrera et al. 2022). They continue to point that Italy is an interesting case for this because of its, “relatively high share of mismatched graduates typical of Italy could be due not

only to an excess supply of (or a low demand for) graduates, but also (or rather) to the lack of work-related skills of graduates and to the difficulty of the school-to-work transition system in providing skills which can be used in business” (Caroleo and Pastore 999). In the end, education, as an issue pertinent to the workforce in Italy, points to an excess supply of graduates combined with a natural lesser demand for someone with that educational level; therefore, a gap exists where there is a surplus of educated graduates in Italy.

2.3.9 Responsibilization

One of the contemporary issues impacting this problem is that of responsibilization. Discussed in the context of “the neoliberal responsibility-shift – and the process of responsibilization – would work so that individuals and actors assume responsibility in producing the ends of government ‘by fulfilling themselves’” (Rose, O'Malley and Valverde qtd in Pyysiäinen et al 228). While in this article, it is discussed under the philosophy of governance, the same theory also applies to the theory of thought in terms of the philosophy of responsibility distribution and weight in the workplace. This concept of responsibilization, in the consideration of internships, therefore, allocates the responsibility of one’s performance, experience, and overall fulfillment to the shoulders of the intern. In a more concrete consideration of the workforce environment, the concept of responsibilization ties directly with that of the psychological contract and neoliberalism.

2.3.10 Neoliberalism

Elaborating on responsibilization, as it was defined as a neoliberal responsibility shift, it is also significant to consider neoliberalism. In Vintiadis’s *Neoliberal values and the workplace: a way through capabilities and care*, the author indicates that neoliberalism has been an overarching trend in the workplace over the past 40 years, which has been a social context, “restricting people’s freedom and compromising their well-being, often not allowing them to develop their human abilities in the way they choose to” (Vintiadis 99). The author points to the exact definition of neoliberalism being “notoriously hard to pin down” (Vintiadis 100). At its core, it emphasizes an unregulated economy and governance. While it is not the scope of this thesis to focus on neoliberalism as a main priority, it may prove to be a context of cultural work conditions that prove to be relevant later.

2.3.11 Psychological Contract

Another element relevant to an internship's conditions, the psychological contract is defined by EBSCO as “an informal and implicit set of expectations that exists between employers and employees, often going beyond the formal job descriptions and contracts. This concept encompasses both transactional aspects, such as fair compensation and shared values, and relational components that emphasize trust and communication within the workplace” (Campbell 2024). In other words, the psychological contract is the bond or agreement one finds oneself in beyond one's contract. In relevance to internships, as all work environments, there exists the possibility of psychological contracts.

The psychological contract is specifically relevant to consider for the case of Italian internships based on existing reports. In David Arcidiacono's analysis of Italian internships and their qualities, he explicitly found that, through his analysis “ the analyzed data show that companies expect from trainees a full commitment to the values and the corporate culture, a total willingness to extend working times or extend the content of their job, as well as the ability to work independently, similar in all what they would expect from a regular employee according to a mutual exchange of obligations and rights” (Arcidiacono 181). In summary, his research has found that Italian company culture has a trend highlighting psychological contracts, which, by its nature, full commitment to the values and the corporate culture, extension of working times or the content of the job, may alter how one impacts the quality of an internship as an educational experience. Bearing this in mind, the next working definition of *La Gavetta* may shed some light to this matter as well.

2.3.12 “*La Gavetta*”

The concept of *La Gavetta* is culturally and linguistically unique to Italy. Translating from the Cambridge Dictionary, it directly means a “hard apprenticeship | difficult training period” (“La Gavetta” 2018). From the literal translation, the concept of *La Gavetta* translates to a type of cultural norm or expectation, not uncommon within Italy, that values commitment to performing hard work in a training or apprenticeship period, which may even be applied to an internship. While this definition would be improved by a bridged literature gap of peer-reviewed sources fully analyzing this as a concept of Italian work culture, Lorenzo Villani describes it well

here³: “You are considered deserving only if you commit yourself, make sacrifices and are willing to compromise” (Villani 2023)⁴. This, in turn, psychologically shifts the context of what it could mean to be an intern in Italy; there may exist a culture of unspoken rules of commitment, which potentially may be prioritized over the educational value of an internship. In other words, a work culture under *La Gavetta* may prioritize one’s commitment to hard work and mental dedication to the internship more so than one increasing their skills and capabilities. This concept of *La Gavetta* also exists as a moment of motivation to examine the Italian case of internships, specifically, to begin to analyze the factors impacting one’s early career trajectory, capabilities, and capacity to aspire.

2.3.13 Globalization

Another factor that may impact the experience of internships is globalization, a steady ongoing process as the world begins to feel smaller and smaller, and the ability to pursue mobility opportunities continues to exist. For example, as an American studying in Italy, the author of this thesis is a direct result of increased globalization and therefore internationality. On discussing global graduate labor markets, Noorda states the case clearly:

One of the important factors impacting graduate labour markets is globalisation. This impact is felt both by recruiters and by candidates. Ambitious students begin to build up their portfolio from day one, preparing themselves for international competition; ready to move wherever attractive opportunities may lie in store for them. International business is constantly on the move, establishes branches led by market relevance and recruits its graduate employees worldwide (Noorda 13).

This element of continuous movement and high competition is of specific interest. As students may aim to further gain a competitive edge, or experience a new, international internship or work environment, Noorda asserts that we are indeed in an age of globalization, which specifically impacts the market for graduate labor. Globalization, when put into context, may also explain or support underlying trends or discoveries within the collected data for this thesis.

³ This quote is a translation of this text in Italian: “Sei meritevole solo se ti impegni, fai sacrifici e sei disposto a scendere a compromessi” (Vallani 2023).

⁴ In this specific case, Villani makes an argument against the rhetoric and concept of *La Gavetta*. While this is his personal stance, the article nonetheless stands to acknowledge that the concept of *La Gavetta* does indeed exist, even if its pervasiveness hasn’t been concretely determined.

2.4 The Impact of Conversion Factors on the Internship Experience

Like working definitions and core concepts, it is important to begin identifying the key explicative factors at hand. These refer to the *conversion rates* of conversion factors – understood as the extent to which different conditions shape internship outcomes. In this sense, conversion rates synthesize multiple underlying factors, highlighting the most influential in determine whether an internship expands or restrict an individual’s capabilities and aspirations. The explanatory factors identified here serve to indicate which of these are most significant. I will base the conversion matters of significance around general research and thought, which answers the question, “*What makes an internship experience most positively impactful?*” And, more specifically, “*what conversion factors in the workplace leave an impact on one’s capabilities and aspirations?*”, again based on the Capability Approach and Capacity to Aspire. These factors have already begun to be identified by academics; for example, “incorporating Deci and Ryan’s (2000) concept of self-determination, which encompasses autonomy” (Soffia et al. 2023). This highlight demonstrates the imperative nature of self-determination and autonomy in being in positive correlation with being a witness to the Capability Approach at the workplace. Similarly, “Using data from the Fifth European Working Condition Survey by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound), Green and Mostafa (2012) propose an operational application of the Capability Approach which covers seven features of job quality, including earnings, job prospects, working time quality, physical and social environment, work intensity, and skills and discretion” (Soffia et al. 2023). For all intents and purposes, these factors indicated here – that of job quality, earnings, job prospects, etc. – will serve as the framework of conversion factors.

2.5 A Diagrammatic Representation of the Conceptual Model

Having established the working definitions, core concepts, and justification for applying the conceptual framework to the case study of Italy, I now present the conceptual models. For each one, I will describe what they individually represent, why they are significant, and provide credit to the prior research justifying why the elements are what they are. For the purposes of clarity, the model below (Figure 1) demonstrates the synthesized conceptual framework. Based on the theory discussed in the literature review, the conceptual model is as follows:

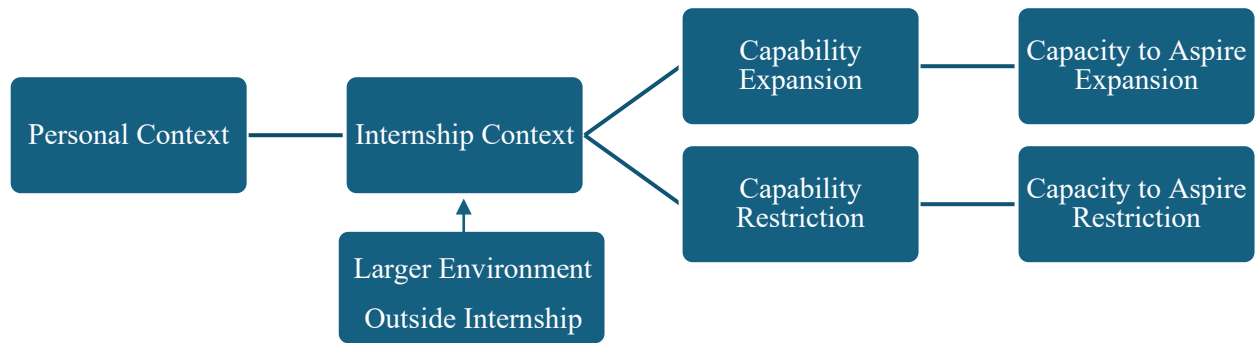


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 demonstrates how pursuing an advanced education takes on an internship experience, the quality of the experience either expands or erodes one’s capabilities as well as capacity to aspire. Following Figure 1’s model of the conceptual framework, this thesis highlights the critical educational nature as an individual transitions to work, and the potential it

has to either further one's career.

| Environmental Explicative Factors | Capability Expansion | Capability Restriction |
|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 1. Feedback and mentorship (quality, frequency, presence)• 2. Workplace climate (respect, recognition, or hostility, discrimination...)• 4. Autonomy and responsibility (independence, ownership of tasks, trust from supervisors)• 5. Task quality and skill usage (meaningful vs repetitive, development)• 7. Contractual conditions (paid or unpaid, working hours...) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 1. Mentor provides high quality feedback, consistently whether positive or negative. Mentor demonstrates interest in helping intern grow. Anticipated result → intern grows confident in their capabilities.• 2. Internship hosting organization makes concerted effort to encourage intern to belong. Anticipated result → intern produces work with confidence, can see themselves having a continued relationship with coworkers. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 1. Mentor provides poor quality, or no feedback. Anticipated result → intern feels increasingly insecure about capabilities, perhaps producing lesser-quality work.• 2. The internship hosting organization does not make effort to include the intern; intern feels “other” to their colleagues, an outside. Anticipated result → intern feels psychological and social stress, leading to decreased confidence in capabilities. |

Figure 2: Environmental Explicative Factors Impacting Capability Expansion or Restriction

| Personal Explicative Factors | Capability Expansion | Capability Restriction |
|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1. Skills and competencies already equipped (technical, cultural, social...) • 2. Motivation and dedication • 4. Demographic qualities (age, gender, nationality...) • 5. Access to socioeconomic resources (economic, social, cultural capital) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1. Intern begins the internship with many relevant skills, for example social and technical skills. Anticipated result → intern feels well-equipped and confident to complete tasks. • 2. Intern is highly motivated to learn and grow. For example, they see this internship as a possible field work for themselves in the future. Anticipated result → the intern begins the internship with a positive attitude and perseveres through challenges. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1. Intern begins the internship with a misalignment of relevant skills, for example, not having social or technical skills. Anticipated result → intern feels unprepared and not confident in their ability to complete tasks. • 2. Intern is not highly motivated to learn and grow. For example, they see this internship as a requirement to graduate from their degree, and nothing more. Anticipated result → the intern begins the internship with a less positive attitude and struggles to persevere through challenges. |

Figure 3: Personal Explicative Factors Impacting Capability Expansion or Restriction

Figures 2 and 3, as shown above, highlight the critical elements of analysis for this thesis: the conversion rates. Figure 2 shows examples of conversion factors regarding the internship environment, whereas Figure 3 shows examples of conversion factors regarding the intern's personal nature or disposition. From there, the conversion rates may potentially explain an intern's capability expansion or restriction. Referring to the original research question, an anticipated result of the assigned tutor, or mentor, providing consistent, high-quality feedback is thus enabling increased confidence and capabilities for the intern. In the inverse, Figure 2 demonstrates that if the opposite occurs – a mentor or tutor provides poor quality or even no feedback – the intern may feel less capable. While these are currently anticipated results, Figures

2 and 3 serve to demonstrate some of the conversion rates at hand during an internship experience, which will be fully explored during the moment of data collection and discussion.

2.6 Analytical Model

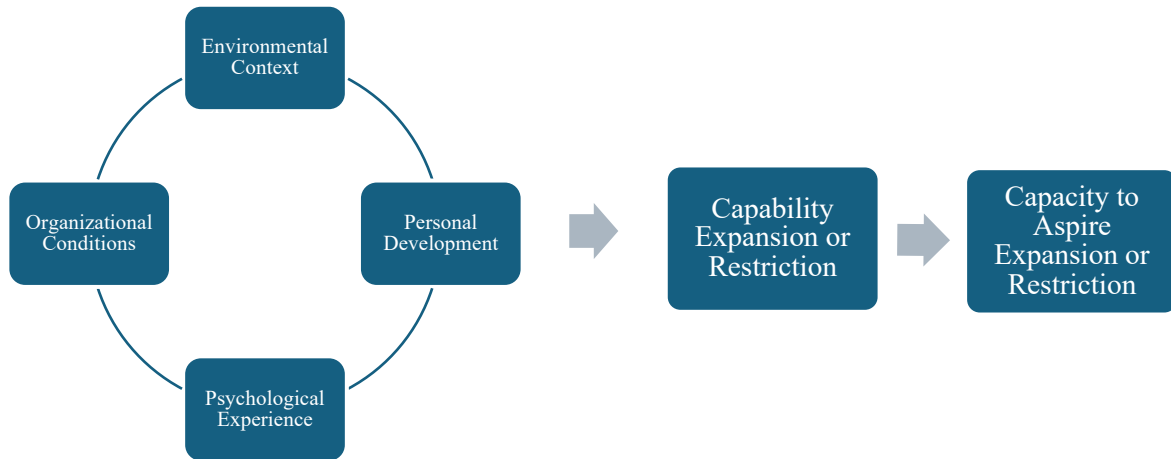


Figure 4: Operationally Transforming Theory to a Baseline for Data Analysis

The above Figure 4 synthesizes the most notable themes thus far and divides them into 4 different categories of factors that impact eventual outcomes: the organizational conditions of the internship host, the larger environmental context, personal development experienced during the internship⁵, and the psychological experience of the intern. All combined, each of these factors is expected to influence to some degree the result of the internship. These categories reflect elements important for the Capacity to Aspire and Capability Approach in terms of the market and demonstrate how my data will capture these dimensions. The aim is to operationalize these elements in a real-time Italian case study, providing a snapshot of the current state of internship culture in Italy. By examining these interrelated conversion rates, this approach offers a holistic understanding of whether an internship experience expands or restricts capabilities, and consequently, whether the intern’s capacity to aspire has been expanded or reduced.

2.7 Expected Outcomes

Ultimately, the goal is to understand internships beyond just “good” or “bad”. Educational experiences⁶ are integral to providing firsthand experience, which can be far more

⁵ As impacted positively or negatively by the outcome of the conversion factors,

⁶ Including work experiences as a form of education

instructive than simply learning about a field in theory. However, a major challenge arises when internship providers lack conditions that allow interns to thrive and gain the most complete and meaningful experience possible. For example, under capacity-expanding conditions, a student might discover a fulfilling career in a certain field. Yet, if early in their career, they encounter a poorly structured internship, this experience may redirect their aspirations entirely. This individual, in this case, experiences a form of loss: had the educational experience been of higher quality, with more attention paid to the conversion factors, the individual may have recognized a broader range of potential career paths.

The objective of this thesis is therefore to identify the most significant conversion factors that constitute a high-quality educational experience during an internship, maximizing the intern's opportunity for success.

2.8 Conceptual Limits

The above discussion begins to respond to the matter of analyzing the impact internships have on early career trajectories. Due to the nature of aspirations, it is outside of the scope of this thesis to consider longer-term impacts of an internship of one's career. Since the self-reporting data is collected from students or workers early in their careers, it is not yet possible to determine how these internship experiences might influence their capabilities and aspirations in the longer term, so that significance may vary. Furthermore, it is outside the scope of this study to consider where one's career goes in its later stages. For these reasons, the author recommends future longitudinal research to discover the longer-term impact of internship experiences on full career trajectories.

2.9 Summary

In summary, the functional backbone argument of this thesis is grounded in the conceptual framework that education and work experiences should not only be mechanisms for earning higher wages via the lens of the Human Capital theory, but also as processes that expand an individual's capabilities in a direction of their own choosing. Education and work should enable individuals to pursue careers and lifestyles that they value independently. Considering this, internships in Italy will be evaluated according to whether they expand one's capabilities to aspire, or whether they operate inversely, constraining professional development, capacities, and

freedoms. (Chiappero-Martinetti and Sabadash 2014 ; Robeyns 2006; Appadurai 2004; Robeyns 2017).

Italy serves as a primary case study due to several contextual factors: the presence of *La Gavetta*, overeducation (Caroleo and Pastore 2018), and overall unfavorable market conditions for recent graduates with advanced degrees in lieu of a robust full-time employment labor market. These structural features make Italy a particularly illustrative case to examine the shortcomings and strengths of internship experiences.

The conceptual frameworks previously outlined demonstrate the transition of theory into practice. It establishes the basis of reasoning for primary data to be collected by the author, which aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of internship outcomes when triangulated with data from the ILO, OECD, and existing tertiary data reporting on Italian internships.

It is important to note that internships do not exist in a vacuum. There are many factors that may impact one's internship experience that are simply outside the scope of this study. More specifically, the outcomes of this research may serve as an indicator of broader trends of the labor market in Italy. For example, hypothetically, if interns in Italy generally do not receive quality guidance, why might that be? How could this be impacted by the labor market? While such broader questions are highly relevant, the analysis must remain disciplined and bound by the original research question:

Which conversion factors within internship experiences, particularly those in the case of Italy, *most* significantly influence young people's capabilities and capacity to aspire, and how do these experiences influence, shape, or impact their early career trajectories?

Ultimately, the significance of this thesis lies in identifying the factors most critical to student success within internship experiences. Given the timing and transitional nature of internships, and their potential to guide students toward or away from specific professional trajectories, it is argued that internships should be intentionally structured and thoughtfully regulated. While critics may point out that internships risk devolving into cheap or unpaid labor, defined by performative displays of commitment or menial tasks, this research emphasizes the conditions under which internships can instead function as true capability-expanding experiences. The following Chapter 3 will, therefore, discuss the data collected by surveys and

interviews, which will then be triangulated with existing reports and research on the state of contemporary internship experiences in Italy. In the end, the data should result in a snapshot of the state of contemporary internship experiences in Italy, ripe for analysis.

Chapter 3: Data Methods

3.1 Introduction

To examine the contemporary state of Italian internships and their impact on interns' capabilities and aspirations, this study integrates primary, secondary, and tertiary data sources. Primary data was collected through a survey and interviews with students and recent graduates, mostly of the University of Pavia (UNIPV). Secondary data includes statistics and reports from the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Tertiary data consists of relevant findings from recent research on the state of Italian internships.

This multi-source approach allows for a comprehensive analysis of lived internship experiences, especially by combining quantitative and qualitative data to identify the explanatory factors most critical to the expansion or restriction of interns' capabilities and aspirations. By triangulating all the above forms of data, this study aims to produce nuanced, comprehensive, and robust insights into the current state of Italian internships.

3.2 Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To collect self-reported data from students and recent graduates who have completed internships in Italy.
2. Assess the role of personal and environmental explanatory factors on shaping internship outcomes.
3. Identify which explanatory factors most significantly impact the expansion or restriction of interns' capabilities and aspirations.
4. With the basis of the secondary data from the ILO and OECD, compare how the primary and tertiary data may provide context and reveal broader patterns in Italian internship experiences.

Regarding this study's survey, its questions were designed to capture both personal ⁷and environmental explanatory factors⁸. For example, respondents of the survey, in addition to providing basic demographic information, responded to questions on their perception of their personal factors, such as:

For each of the statements below, indicate your level of agreement.

1 = Strongly disagree | 2 = Disagree | 3 = Neutral | 4 = Agree | 5 = Strongly agree

I gave my strongest effort to perform well during this internship.

This question, for example, seeks to understand the respondent's self-perception of their drive and effort. Another example regarding environmental information, respondents answered the prompt:

My supervisor/tutor provided regular, constructive feedback and support.

After collecting survey responses, interviews of various respondents allowed for the opportunity for respondents to reflect on significant moments during their internships and suggest improvements, offering qualitative depth that ultimately complements the survey data. For example, respondents were offered a casual, respondent-led discussion, prompted with questions such as, *If you had the opportunity to make your own internship from scratch, and anything was possible, what elements would you keep, and what would you change?* Collecting the primary data in the survey and interview form, along with relevant secondary and tertiary data, allowed for the strongest research toolset to seek to answer the research objectives.

3.3 Hypothesis

This study is guided by the following hypothesis: when internship experiences provide high-quality environmental conversion factors, these conditions are expected to expand the student or recent graduate's capabilities and aspirations. Conversely, when such environmental conversion factors in an internship experience fail to reach their potential, it may ultimately reduce the intern's capabilities and aspirations. Rather than labeling an internship experience as "good" or

⁷ E.g. motivation, effort

⁸ E.g. Feedback and mentorship (quality, frequency, presence), workplace climate (respect, recognition, or hostility, discrimination...),

“bad”, critical analysis of the environmental conversion factors⁹ may identify which factors are most critical to expanding an intern’s capacities and aspirations. Similarly, this study hypothesizes that internship programs that exploit students, for example, through overwork with minimal compensation¹⁰, or those that foster psychologically unsafe working environments, cannot speak up for themselves, when necessary, create psychological stress that leads to capability reduction and altered aspirations. Finally, this study hypothesizes that structural factors specific to the Italian context, such as *La Gavetta*, in addition to larger cultural considerations such as overeducation, globalization, psychological contracts, and neoliberal responsabilization impact the contemporary lived internship experience in Italy as well.

Given that a standard multiple linear regression looks like this:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1X_1 + \beta_2X_2 + \dots + \beta_pX_p + \epsilon^{11}$$

The hypothesis for this study may also be represented as the following:

$$Y(\textit{Internship Outcome}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1\textit{Personal} + \beta_2\textit{Environmental} + \epsilon$$

Where the above Y(Internship Outcome) equation represents the hypothesized impact of personal and environmental explanatory factors on the internship experience outcome, Y(Internship Outcome). The same variables - $\beta_1\textit{Personal} + \beta_2\textit{Environmental}$ - are anticipated to also impact Capacity Expansion and Aspiration Expansion¹², thus represented as:

$$Y(\textit{Capacity Expansion}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1\textit{Personal} + \beta_2\textit{Environmental} + \epsilon$$

and

$$Y(\textit{Aspiration Expansion}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1\textit{Personal} + \beta_2\textit{Environmental} + \epsilon$$

⁹ While controlling for personal conversion factors,

¹⁰ Or no compensation at all,

¹¹ “with: Y the dependent variable | X the independent variable | β_0 the intercept (the mean value of Y when $x=0$), also sometimes denoted α | β_1 the slope (the expected increase in Y when X increases by one unit) | ϵ the residuals (the error term of mean 0 which describes the variations of Y not captured by the model, also referred as the noise)” (Soetewey 2021)

¹² Or inversely, capacity restriction and aspiration restriction

The above statistically represented equations are simply another way of representing the intended hypothesis.

This thesis also argues that internship experiences function as a critical moment of learning potential while transitioning to the workforce, and that the quality of internship conversion rates determines whether this transitional, critical moment expands or restricts young people's substantive capabilities and capacity to aspire.

This hypothesis, in addition to its basis on Chapter 1's literature review, draws inspiration from the article, "Addressing labour market challenges from a human-centred perspective: a review of the literature on work and the Capability Approach" from Magdalena Soffia, Matthew Hall, and Jolene Skordis published in the Pissarides Review into the Future of Work and Wellbeing. While the article primarily examines working conditions in the United Kingdom, it analyzes them through the lens of the Capability Approach. This perspective, centered along with the literature review, allows us to understand which working conditions – which conversion factors - support or harm one's capabilities. I will then cross-reference these insights with contemporary data from Italy, including ILO statistics, my own survey, interviews, and OECD information. This combined analysis will provide a clearer structure of the main conversion factors for interns in Italy, while also identifying patterns that may inform the broader academic understanding of how students with advanced degrees transition from education to the workforce.

3.4 Primary Data

3.4.1 Research Design and Strategy

This study used a mixed-methods approach to combine quantitative and qualitative data. In the distributed survey, in addition to collecting basic demographic data, the survey primarily used Likert-scale questions. For these, respondents were prompted with a statement and given the opportunity to respond from 1 to 5, where 1 was strongly disagree, 2 was somewhat disagree, 3 was neutral, 4 was somewhat agree, and 5 was strongly agree. This enabled the quantification of perceptions and feelings regarding various experiences. This quantitative data was then analyzed using R Studio to examine statistical relationships. In the same survey, respondents

were also allowed to respond qualitatively to open-ended questions. This qualitative data provided further context and insight to the quantified data.

To encourage respondents to participate in the survey, respondents were incentivized by the opportunity to win a 20-euro Amazon gift card¹³, which will be awarded to one respondent at random upon the finalization of this study. There was a link at the end of the first survey that brought respondents to a second page, where they submitted their email address to be considered for the gift card. This way, the winner of the gift card could be contacted. This second response form was also optional, and the answers to the survey were not connected to those who filled out the contact form. It was also at the end of this contact form that respondents were allowed the opportunity to indicate if they would consent to being contacted regarding a brief follow-up interview.

Regarding these interviews, as an informal part of data collection, they allowed the researcher to explore the nuances of an individual's internship experience and encouraged the respondents to discuss matters of their internship experience that truly mattered to them. This study, after the author of this thesis contacted the consenting respondents, scheduled 8 interviews through the month of March. These follow-up interviews were conducted with respondents who were informed of the purpose of the study, the use of their data, the ability to provide information anonymously, and the voluntary nature of participation.

3.4.2 Data Collection Strategy

The primary data was collected between February and March 2026. The survey was distributed with a wide scope. The author found success in survey distribution through various degree department leadership at UNIPV. The data collected in the Google Forms survey allowed the author to analyze the data privately, without sharing it with third parties. And of those who participated in the anonymous survey, they received an optional second link, which allowed them to provide contact information¹⁴ if they desired to be contacted.

During the interviews, the data collection strategy was for the author of this study to transcribe the interaction for further data analysis. Each interview participant was informed of

¹³ This will be discussed further in 3.4.5 Ethical Considerations

¹⁴ Not connected with their survey answers, so the survey answers remained anonymous

the intention and use of the data, also that their information would be completely anonymous and sensitive or identifying data would not be included for analysis purposes. This allowed the author to compare lived experiences based on conversion factors previously discussed in Chapter 2.

3.4.3 Sampling Strategy and Respondents

This study targeted students and recent graduates with internship experience in Italy, regardless of nationality. While initial outreach included multiple Italian universities¹⁵, the survey was more effectively distributed within the University of Pavia, complemented by responses collected via word-of-mouth and networking.

The author is grateful to the heads of the departments who supported this initiative by sharing the survey with their students¹⁶. It was important for the sampling strategy to receive responses from an array of studies, to receive results that could be compared across departments. For this study, it was important to receive responses across a variety of degree backgrounds to more accurately reflect the holistic internship experience, not just for that of a certain type of degree.

Finally, to encourage responses, the author of this survey took the initiative to create her own posters, distributed around campus at a variety of cafes, *bacheche*¹⁷, and even handed out directly to young people in public spaces of Pavia¹⁸ to view the posters. The posters featured hand-drawn figures depicting both an intern struggling and one thriving, and each version was available in English and Italian.

As a result of this distribution effort, the final sample included 56 survey respondents, with 8 follow-up interviews. Demographic data¹⁹ was collected to allow for analysis across different intern groups. Survey respondents represented in the vast majority a range of Master's programs across UNIPV, ensuring diverse perspectives on lived internship experiences.

¹⁵ See the full list of Italian Universities contacted in Annex Item 1.

¹⁶ The full list of UNIPV departments contacted may be seen in Annex Item 2

¹⁷ Italian for "bulletin-boards"

¹⁸ These posters are available under Annex Item 3.

¹⁹ E.g. gender, age, degree type

3.4.4 Data Management and Processing

The data collected was kept privately, only handled by the author of this thesis, Hannah Gudny Svelling. It was not shared with 3rd parties, and data was collected privately on her computer. The data collected through the Google Forms survey was available in two forms: in English and Italian, to best accommodate the local student population's language preferences. The survey data was exported into Microsoft Excel for processing. Respondents who did not meet the inclusion criteria, primarily those who completed their internship outside of Italy, were excluded. Responses were differentiated by giving each one a respondent letter (A, B, C, etc.) to differentiate responses.

The quantitative data was processed in both Microsoft Excel to generate charts and visual aids. In addition, the variables included in the hypothesis were put into a correlation matrix in Excel. While it is important to note that correlation between variables does not equate to causation between one variable and the other, it may act as a preliminary means of analysis to reveal underlying trends. While the initial scope of the thesis intended to run a multiple linear regression in R Studio, as this would reveal stronger trends in causation, more survey responses would be required. This is due to the nature of the survey having many factors, and a final dataset of 39 responses would be insufficient to reveal causation. As a result, this study suggests that with further collection of responses, a multiple linear regression would provide further insight to the underlying trends of the most impactful explanatory variables²⁰.

By using R Studio, this study would be enabled to run a multiple linear regression, which “is used to assess the relationship between two variables while taking into account the effect of other variables. By taking into account the effect of other variables, we cancel out the effect of these other variables in order to isolate and measure the relationship between the two variables of interest. This point is the main difference with simple linear regression” (Soetewey 2021). Similarly to how the conversion rates related to the Capability Approach consider how different capabilities impact each other, a multiple linear regression considers how the presence of multiple explanatory variables impact one given outcome – in this case, the indicated internship outcomes, as reported by respondents. As such, this is why a multiple linear regression is appropriate to analyze the impacts of multiple variables on one outcome. If a given variable has a

²⁰ The array of personal and environmental explanatory factors

p-value<.05, this signifies that the observed relationship between the explanatory and the independent variables is unlikely to have occurred by chance. Therefore, this multiple linear regression provides insight into which explanatory factors are most strongly associated with variations in interns' perceived capability and aspiration expansion or restriction.

3.4.5 Ethical Considerations

In compliance with UNIPV data collection, this study submitted the *Progetto di Ricerca* form to UNIPV, which detailed the nature of the data collection. Participation in both the survey and interview was voluntary, with informed consent obtained for both the survey and interview. Data was anonymized, stored securely, and used exclusively internally for research purposes.

There was an optional incentive offered – a gift card draw – and it was not connected with interview participation. Interview recordings were transcribed with respondents' consent, and respondents consented to the use of direct quotes if useful for research demonstration purposes, with any sensitive or identifying information removed. No sensitive data, such as company names, were collected or requested, and this researcher declares no conflicts of interest.

3.4.6 Limitations

The sample is geographically limited, as the majority of respondents were UNIPV students with relevant internship experience. While the sample size of 56 respondents for a study meets the minimal requirements for multiple regression, a larger and more geographically diverse Italian respondent pool would allow the study to produce more robust conclusions. Future research should aim for broader collaboration across multiple Italian universities to obtain an even more thorough and accurate representative view of internship conditions across all of Italy.

Also, while running a multiple linear regression, it is important to know that a good general rule of thumb in the statistics world is that for every explanatory factor you wish to include in your multiple linear regression, you should have 10 data points to correspond with it. So, for example, given that the responses to the survey total 56 respondents, the multiple linear regression may confidently consider 4 different explanatory factors for their impact on the result: the internship outcome, and whether respondents find that their capabilities and aspirations were expanded or restricted. Ideally, this survey would have garnered many more responses – for

example, 200 – to allow for more precise analysis of the factors at hand. As such, this author recommends that for future study, a survey of this nature receive many more responses for even more precise answers. But, despite the respondent total of 56, this will not compromise the results – it will only slightly limit the scope through which it may be understood.

3.5 Secondary Data

For a wider scope, secondary data regarding internship experiences in Italy holistically provides a broader context for interpreting the collected primary data. As such, this study consults data collected from the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) – two trusted resources that provide data regarding the labor force and internships in the contemporary era. For further consideration, this study attempted to contact AlmaLaurea to collect additional secondary data, but no response was provided.

3.5.1 International Labor Organization

The International Labor Organization, or ILO, was a crucial research resource. As a specialized agency of the United Nations, the ILO has compiled significant reports, as well as databases with relevant statistics. Given that one of their primary objectives is, “to set labour standards, develop policies, and devise programmes promoting decent work for all women and men” (“About the ILO” 2026), their work directly coincides with the objectives of this thesis.

3.5.2 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

Similarly to the ILO, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, or OECD, plays an integral role on the international scale to promote international well-being. More specifically, it is an “international organisation that works to build better policies for better lives. [...] We work closely with policy makers, stakeholders and citizens to establish evidence-based international standards and to find solutions to social, economic and environmental challenges” (“About: Better Policies for Better Lives” 2026). While the OECD focuses on a wider array of topics, from Agriculture to Transport, they are a rich resource on the topic of Education and skills. Based on the most data and reports from the ILO and OECD, this thesis will compare the results and findings from the primary data against the current findings.

3.6 Tertiary Data

Regarding tertiary data, this study will incorporate key findings from existing literature on Italian internships, which provide further context for interpreting the primary and secondary data. Naturally, other authors have had access to different resources, number of respondents, etc. Therefore, it may be considered helpful to have at our disposal the included context of the findings of other authors.

3.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has discussed the rationale for collecting and utilizing primary, secondary, and tertiary data to answer the original research question. The research objectives were defined, and the hypothesis was highlighted. This chapter gave attention to the primary data, as the author of this thesis conducted her own research in both interview and survey form, leading to high-quality quantitative and qualitative data. This chapter also reviewed the ethical considerations and limitations regarding the primary data gathered. Then, triangulating this primary data with secondary and tertiary data, Chapter 3 has demonstrated the motivation for such data strategies: to gather a layered array of research that supports each other in answering the original research question. Finally, upon this foundation, Chapter 4 will present the data findings and discuss their significance.

Chapter 4: Data Results and Discussion

4.1 Primary Data – Survey

The final dataset of data collected via the survey was tailored for accuracy. While 56 total responses were recorded, some responses were incomplete as not all respondents completed the survey. In addition, a few respondents reported that, while they were students in Italy, their internship took place outside of Italy. Responses like this were rendered irrelevant to the study. After removing these incomplete and irrelevant responses, the final dataset consisted of 39 valid responses regarding internship experiences in Italy. The following data from the survey represents basic demographic information of respondents as well as the primary findings. Then, a correlation chart was developed in Excel to highlight which factors have high or low levels of correlation between the surveyed explanatory factors, and internship, capability, and aspiration outcomes.

4.1.1 General Overview of Results

Overall data gathered from the demographics of respondents may be seen in the Annex. More specifically, some general statistics regarding the survey are as follows: Of the 39 valid responses, 87% of respondents came from the University of Pavia²¹, with the remainder being a combination of Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (5%), Università degli Studi di Milano (3%), IUAV di Venezia (3%), and Hellenic Open University²² (2%) (Annex Item 4), accurately representing the successful survey distribution of UNIPV students.

As for the reported fields of study, there was an interesting division among respondents: 41% studied Social Sciences, and 41% studied STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math). These were the two most prominent fields of study, followed by Business / Management (5%), Health (3%), and Other (2%). This data may be viewed in Annex Item 6. One possible explanation for this pattern is that, given the strong representation of UNIPV respondents, the degree profile may reflect which departments and professors were most active in distributing the survey.

Respondents also reported on whether their internship was curricular or extracurricular. Of the 39 eligible respondents, 64% reported that their internship was curricular, meaning that it formed part of their official study plan. The remaining 36% reported that their internship was extracurricular, meaning it took place outside of the requirements of a given degree program. This result may also be viewed in Annex Item 5.

Regarding payment, 51% of respondents said that they received compensation for their internship. 44% reported that they were not compensated, and 5% preferred not to disclose this information. Respondents were not asked to specify the amount of compensation, as this prompt was to assess the prevalence of unpaid internships from this sample. This may be viewed in Annex Item 8.

Overall, the demographic sample had the following general findings: the average age of respondents was 25.5 years old, 81.57% of respondents were female, and 56.41% indicated that they had prior full-time work experience. The average internship duration was 6.82 months, and the average hours per week worked were 39. In reference to the internship hosting organization,

²¹ This high concentration of UNIPV representation limits the extent to which the survey's findings can be applied to the concept of Italian internships as a whole.

²² While the University is Greek, the internship experience was confirmed to have taken place in Italy

36% interned at a University or Research Institute, 23% interned at a Startup or Small to Medium Enterprise (SME), 21% interned at a Large private company, 10% at a nonprofit, 5% in government, and 5% at a hospital²³.

While the above depicts the demographic information of respondents, the following chart will show the distribution of responses to the Likert-scale responses. Respondents were prompted with a variety of questions, which corresponded to a variety of explanatory variables. Below is the result:

| Proportions of Responses to Prompts on Likert Scale | | | | | |
|--|-------------------|-------------------|----------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| | Strongly Disagree | Slightly Disagree | Neither Agree nor Disagree | Slightly Agree | Strongly Agree |
| I felt welcomed in the duration of this Internship | 15.38% | 7.69% | 23.08% | 30.77% | 23.08% |
| My supervisor/tutor provided regular, constructive feedback and support | 15.38% | 10.26% | 25.64% | 25.64% | 23.08% |
| I had autonomy to decide how to carry out my tasks | 12.82% | 12.82% | 23.08% | 15.38% | 35.90% |
| My workload was reasonable and manageable. | 7.69% | 15.38% | 10.26% | 30.77% | 35.90% |
| My contracted hours were respected | 7.69% | 7.69% | 10.26% | 41.03% | 33.33% |
| I used and practiced skills I already had | 7.69% | 15.38% | 30.77% | 28.21% | 17.95% |
| I was fairly compensated relative to my responsibilities | 30.77% | 25.64% | 17.95% | 12.82% | 12.82% |
| When tasks became stressful, I struggled to cope | 35.90% | 28.21% | 20.51% | 10.26% | 5.13% |
| I was able to maintain my physical health during this internship. | 17.95% | 5.13% | 28.21% | 12.82% | 35.90% |
| I felt confident I could complete the internship successfully | 15.38% | 2.56% | 10.26% | 23.08% | 48.72% |
| I learned about job or career opportunities I would not have known otherwise | 12.82% | 12.82% | 23.08% | 20.51% | 30.77% |
| The internship increased my interest in this career field | 20.51% | 15.38% | 12.82% | 20.51% | 30.77% |
| I gave my strongest effort to perform well during this internship. | 0.00% | 0.00% | 10.26% | 33.33% | 56.41% |

Figure 1: Proportions of responses to prompts on the Likert Scale

This figure represents the most relevant data collected from the survey. Further analysis will be done regarding correlations run through Excel.

In addition to the above questions, respondents also had an opportunity to report on their self-perceived outcomes, regarding the rating of their internship, what results occurred because of the internship, and if they feel that their capabilities and aspirations were expanded or restricted because of the internship experience.

²³ As seen in Annex Item 7

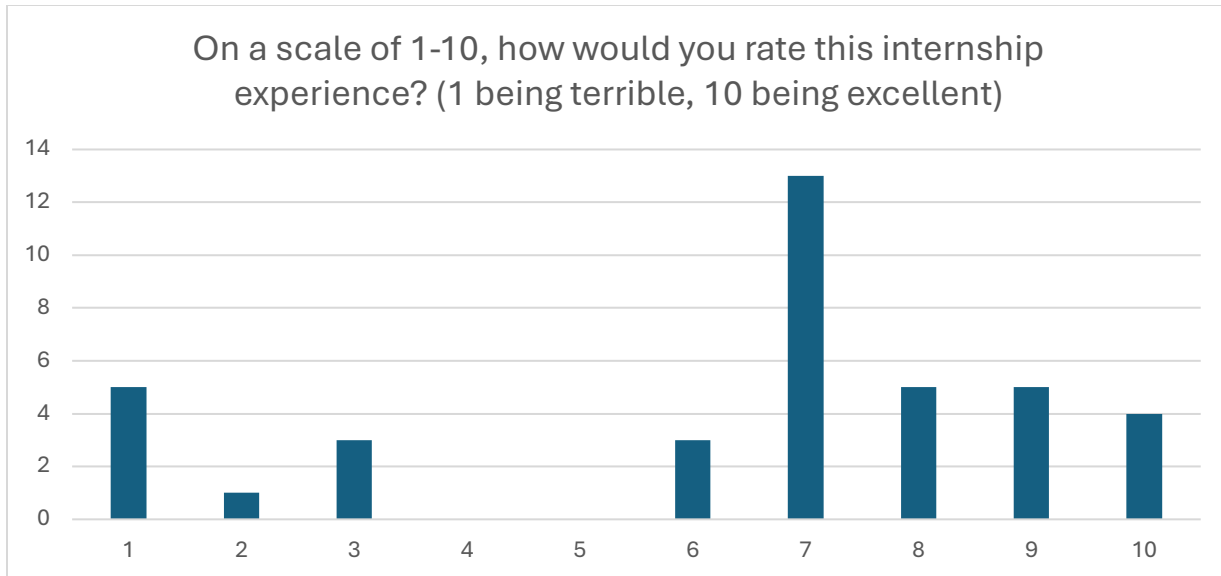


Figure 2: Respondents' rating of their internship experience, 1-10

The first chart depicting interesting results is the general response to the prompt, *On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate this internship experience? (1 being terrible, 10 being excellent)*. To interpret the chart, the first notable result is that the distribution of responses does not follow a normal distribution. Instead, responses to the prompt appear more polarized, with a concentration around the number 7, with smaller clusters at both the lower and upper ends of the scale. Almost no responses appear in the middle range between 4 and 6. This suggests that internship experiences in the sample may have been perceived by respondents in a positive or negative term, rather than as moderately average. In the end, the average rating was 6.41 out of 10, and the mode was 7.

The second particularly interesting chart concerns the self-reported outcomes respondents gave. When given the prompt: *Did the internship directly result in any of the following? (Select all that apply)*, respondents indicated: 17 found they have a clearer idea of what they would like to do²⁴, 13 said they found a clearer idea of what they would *not* want to do, 10 declared that the internship did not result in any concrete outcomes, 8 reported a new reference or recommendation, 7 reported a new professional contact that they stayed in touch with, and 6 indicated a job offer from the same organization. These outcomes are relatively straightforward

²⁴ Intended to be interpreted with their future possibilities and career,

to self-report because they describe concrete events, rather than perceptions which can be continuous. The figure below provides a visual summary of these responses.

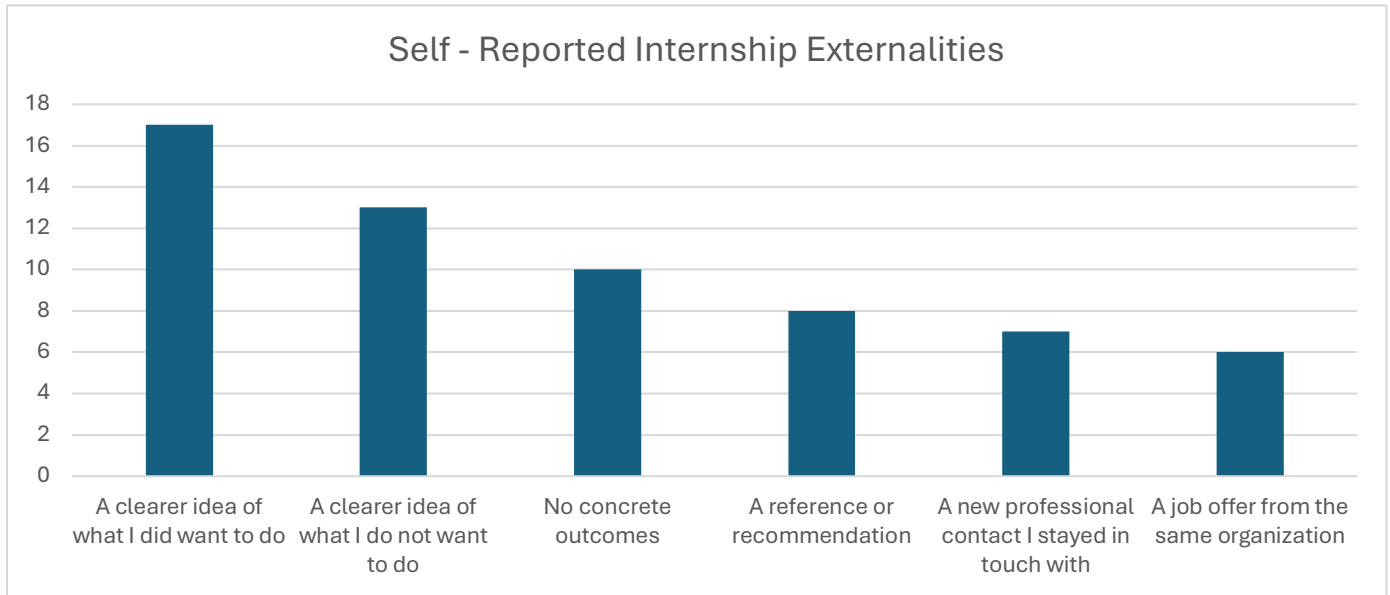


Figure 3: Self-Reported Internship Outcomes

Respondents were also asked to report, in broad terms, whether they felt that their internship impacted their perception of their future career possibilities, relating directly to the primary concern of the Capacity to Aspire. The results are shown below:

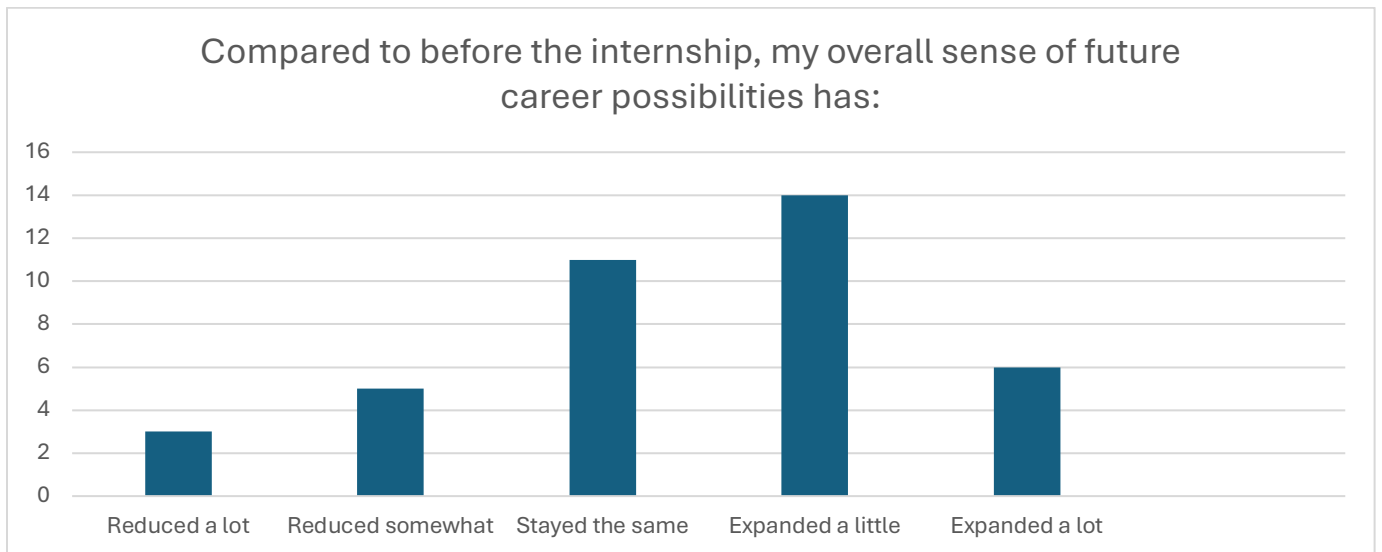


Figure 4: Self-Reported Expansion or Restriction of Aspirations After Internship

This chart displays a somewhat clear adherence to a bell curve, with a slight skew to the right. Most of the respondents either responded that their sense of career possibilities has either stayed the same or expanded a little. And, considering the slight right skew, this suggests that a greater share of respondents felt that their future career possibilities had expanded to a certain extent.

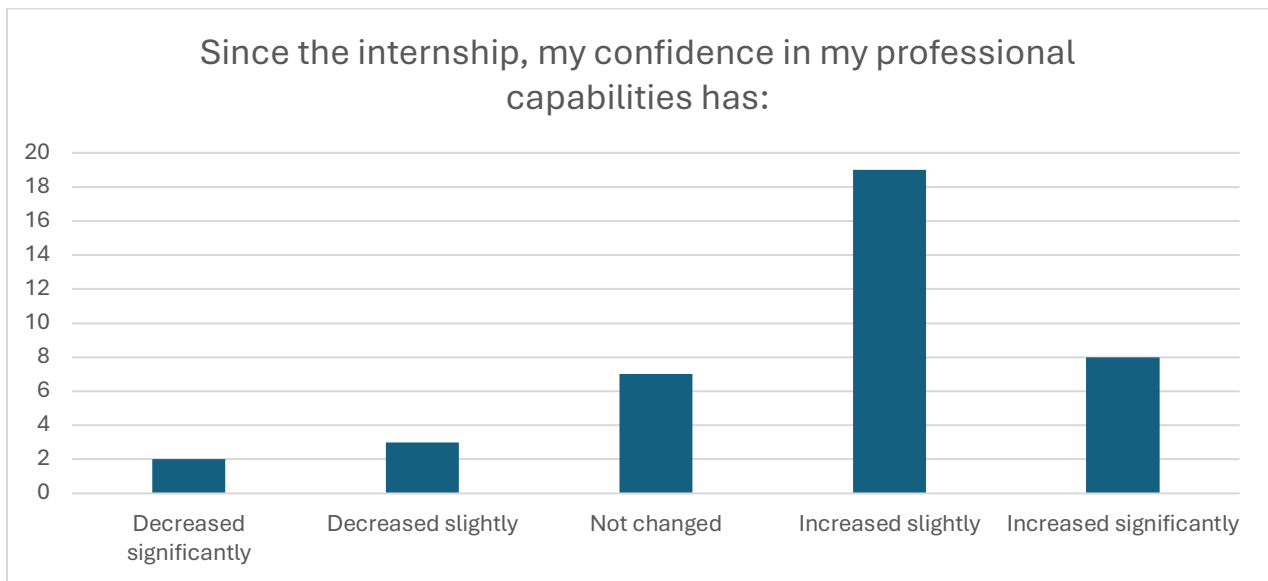


Figure 5: Self-Reported Expansion or Restriction of Capabilities After Internship

Similarly, respondents were asked to self-report about their own perception of the expansion or restriction of confidence in their professional capabilities. This pattern is broadly similar to the pattern observed regarding respondents' aspirations. However, the noticeable difference between these two charts is that there is a stronger tendency towards slightly increased professional capabilities. The results appear similar to those of respondents' perceptions of future career aspirations. However, there is a greater number of respondents – 19 out of 39 – who indicated that their confidence in their professional capabilities has increased slightly. This suggests a somewhat stronger trend of capability expansion rather than aspiration expansion.

Considered together, these results show that this survey collected relevant data regarding demographic information of respondents and the self-reported assessments of internship

experience and outcomes. Questions that had categorical responses - such as the results to the Likert prompts - were relatively easy to capture for respondents because they referred to concrete results and outcomes. On the other hand, the rating of overall experience and the questions on aspirations and capabilities begin to capture more subjective perceptions. These responses are therefore useful as a basis for more extended analysis, particularly that of correlation analysis.

4.1.2 Factor Correlation Analysis

When conducting data analysis, it is important to process data in a way that produces results that are as accurate, consistent, and free from bias as possible. Because the survey includes 12 explanatory factors – such as mentorship, autonomy, workload, etc. – the sample size of 39 responses was not sufficient to support a strong full multiple linear regression across all variables with confidence. In fact, with the number of factors analyzed, 12^{25} , it would have required a total of 120 survey responses altogether. For this reason, the study instead uses a correlation matrix to identify which variables appear most associated with the main outcomes of overall ratings, impacted aspirations, and impacted capabilities. Although correlation does not imply causation – and therefore this study cannot say with concrete confidence that one factor *causes* a result on an outcome, it is a solid foundation through which the data can be explored. With further survey responses and continued research, a multiple linear regression would provide a stronger foundation to assess the direct causal impact of explanatory variables on outcomes. Considering this, please see the chart below, which demonstrates a color-coded correlation matrix:

²⁵ With a good rule of thumb for regressions being 10 responses per factor analyzed,

| | Through the duration of the internship, I felt welcomed and able to fit into the organization. | My supervisor/tutor provided regular, constructive feedback and support. | I had autonomy to decide how to carry out my tasks. | My workload was reasonable and manageable. | My contracted hours were respected. | I used and practiced skills I already had. | I was fairly compensated relative to my responsibilities. | When tasks became stressful, I was able to cope. | I was able to maintain my physical health during this internship. | I felt confident I could complete the internship successfully. | I learned about job or career opportunities I would not have known otherwise. | The internship increased my interest in this career field. | Overall, how would you rate this internship experience? (1 being terrible, 10 being excellent) | Since the internship, my confidence in my professional capabilities has: reduced a lot (1) - expanded a lot (5) | Compared to before, sense of future career possibilities has reduced a lot (1) - expanded a lot (5) |
|---|--|--|---|--|-------------------------------------|--|---|--|---|--|---|--|--|---|---|
| Through the duration of the internship, I felt welcomed and able to fit into the organization. | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| My supervisor/tutor provided regular, constructive feedback and support. | 0.606024213 | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| I had autonomy to decide how to carry out my tasks. | 0.270826278 | 0.610746564 | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| My workload was reasonable and manageable. | 0.399339568 | 0.593308091 | 0.466064621 | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| My contracted hours were respected. | 0.474925543 | 0.495695257 | 0.335030525 | 0.619268933 | 1 | | | | | | | | | | |
| I used and practiced skills I already had. | 0.127708102 | 0.213635792 | 0.15106941 | 0.079214486 | 0.055701707 | 1 | | | | | | | | | |
| I was fairly compensated relative to my responsibilities. | 0.316312734 | 0.345060789 | 0.307148393 | 0.453893702 | 0.346410919 | 0.27813269 | 1 | | | | | | | | |
| When tasks became stressful, I was able to cope. | 0.249749957 | 0.344131624 | 0.222933882 | 0.53814615 | 0.439712555 | 0.156634528 | 0.088790482 | 1 | | | | | | | |
| I was able to maintain my physical health during this internship. | 0.120728453 | 0.349186925 | 0.269407705 | 0.724819923 | 0.480685667 | 0.140667045 | 0.34748686 | 0.522954706 | 1 | | | | | | |
| I felt confident I could complete the internship successfully. | 0.3591789 | 0.539322636 | 0.435674276 | 0.557782465 | 0.589691403 | 0.409905385 | 0.280125122 | 0.671093932 | 0.539047432 | 1 | | | | | |
| I learned about job or career opportunities I would not have known otherwise. | 0.28887519 | 0.44166871 | 0.472221297 | 0.485297328 | 0.370938186 | 0.342674792 | 0.478942134 | 0.271134672 | 0.441023977 | 0.379447606 | 1 | | | | |
| The internship increased my interest in this career field. | 0.355610327 | 0.535341682 | 0.369201468 | 0.603175291 | 0.543064198 | 0.369864959 | 0.449028365 | 0.410765015 | 0.670759288 | 0.586593746 | 0.75145477 | 1 | | | |
| Overall, how would you rate this internship experience? (1 being terrible, 10 being excellent) | 0.49573188 | 0.863178671 | 0.600328971 | 0.710810317 | 0.506369914 | 0.234675287 | 0.426471637 | 0.507994604 | 0.55899141 | 0.711169144 | 0.548918047 | 0.701799639 | 1 | | |
| Since the internship, my confidence in my professional capabilities has: reduced a lot (1) - expanded a lot (5) | -0.017295886 | 0.313560243 | 0.24734486 | 0.361196712 | 0.342844463 | -2.65058E-17 | 0.222924412 | 0.404916458 | 0.400214783 | 0.394664751 | 0.169486566 | 0.28129194 | 0.379075489 | 1 | |
| Compared to before, sense of future career possibilities has reduced a lot (1) - expanded a lot (5) | -0.283903253 | -0.005960073 | 0.078216748 | -0.115738155 | -0.075419935 | 0.071617373 | -0.110571813 | 0.200418109 | 0.149770759 | 0.204040725 | 0.341383036 | 0.174558526 | 0.083198881 | 0.212531233 | 1 |

Figure 6: Explanatory Factor Correlation Matrix

To begin interpreting the above chart, it is important to clarify the meaning of the correlation coefficients used in this analysis. Correlation values range from -1 to 1, where -1 indicates a perfectly negative relationship between two variables²⁶, 0 indicates no observable relationship between the two factors²⁷, and 1 indicates a perfectly positive relationship²⁸. In this study, the explanatory factors: both internal and environmental – are examined in consideration

²⁶ Where as one variable increases, the second variable increases.

²⁷ In other words, one does not impact the other

²⁸ Where, when one factor increases, so does the other factor.

with the outcomes: the independent variables of the overall internship outcome, and changes in aspirations and capabilities.

To highlight and interpret the strength of the correlations, the correlation matrix was visually encoded using a color gradient. Negative correlations are represented in shades of red, values close to zero appear white or close to white, and increasingly strong positive correlations are represented through progressively darker shades of blue. Please note that all outcomes that equal exactly 1 represent factors cross-referenced with themselves. As such, these values of exactly 1 are not analytically meaningful and are excluded from interpretation. Overall, this visual approach with a color gradient allows for clear identification of patterns and relationships across variables.

For further analysis, the charts below indicate the factors with the highest correlation with the previously discussed outcomes, whether positive or negative, as well as identifying the factors that seemed to have close to no correlation at all.

INTERNSHIP RATINGS

| Explanatory Variable ~ Overall rating of internship | Correlation: from -1 to 1 |
|--|---------------------------|
| My supervisor/tutor provided regular, constructive feedback and support ~ Overall rating of internship | 0.863178671 |
| I felt confident I could complete the internship successfully ~ Overall rating of internship | 0.711169144 |
| My workload was reasonable and manageable ~ Overall rating of internship | 0.710810317 |

Figure 7: Explanatory Factors Most Strongly Correlating with Overall Internship Scores

Considering the above chart, it shows that the strongest correlations with overall internship ratings are associated with mentorship, confidence, and workload. The single highest correlation is between receiving regular, constructive feedback and the overall rating. This suggests that

perceived mentorship is most closely associated with how positively respondents evaluated their internship experience. Similarly, respondents who felt confident about successfully completing the internship also is correlated with higher ratings, indicating that confidence and overall satisfaction may be related. Finally, a reasonable and manageable workload also shows a strong positive relationship with internship ratings, suggesting that structural conditions and workload intensity may impact how respondents experienced their internships.

| | |
|--|---------------------------|
| Explanatory Variable ~ Overall rating of internship | Correlation: from -1 to 0 |
| I used and practiced skills I already had ~ Overall rating of internship | 0.234675287 |

Figure 8: Explanatory Factors Most Weakly Correlating with Overall Internship Scores

Contrastingly, some factors show a weak relationship with overall internship ratings. For example, the opportunity to use and practice existing skills shows a relatively low correlation. This suggests that simply applying prior knowledge and skills is not a strong predictor of internship ratings on its own. Instead, the data suggests that support and manageable conditions matter more. The remaining variables fall within a range of moderate positive correlations, suggesting that internship satisfaction is moderately impacted by a wide variety of factors.

ASPIRATIONS

| | |
|---|---------------------------|
| Explanatory Variable ~ Aspirations | Correlation: from -1 to 1 |
| I had autonomy to decide how to carry out my tasks ~ Aspirations | 0.078216748 |
| I used and practiced skills I already had ~ Aspirations | 0.071617373 |
| My supervisor/tutor provided regular, constructive feedback and support ~ Aspirations | -0.005960073 |
| My contracted hours were respected ~ Aspirations | 0.075419935 |

| | |
|--|--|
| | |
|--|--|

Figure 9: Explanatory Factors Most Weakly Correlating with Aspirations

In contrast to internship outcomes, changes in aspirations appear to have notably weak relationships with the explanatory factors. The correlations between the previously mentioned factors and respondents’ reported aspirations are close to zero, indicating that there is practically no evidence of a relationship between the two.

These results suggest that autonomy, the opportunity to use existing skills, respect for contracted hours, and mentorship are not strongly associated with expansions or restrictions of respondents’ future aspirations. This is an interesting finding because it suggests that aspirations are either not impacted strongly by internships or that aspirations may be shaped by factors beyond the internship itself, which was not in the scope of analysis for this study.

CAPABILITIES

| Explanatory Variable ~ Capabilities | Correlation: from -1 to 1 |
|--|---------------------------|
| I was able to maintain my physical health during this internship ~ Capabilities | 0.400214783341093 |
| When tasks became stressful, I managed to cope ~ Capabilities | 0.396044599856652 |
| I felt confident I could complete the internship successfully ~ Capabilities | 0.394664751 |
| My workload was reasonable and manageable ~ Capabilities | 0.361196711948117 |
| My contracted hours were respected ~ Capabilities | 0.342844463129797 |
| My supervisor/tutor provided regular, constructive feedback and support ~ Capabilities | 0.313560243107702 |

Figure 10: Explanatory Factors Most Strongly Correlating with Capabilities

when respondents in general answered favorably to the presence of explanatory factors – whether it be the presence of mentorship, a workload being manageable, or the intern feeling confident to complete the internship – they tended to report higher ratings of internship experiences and, to a certain extent, expanded internship outcomes. As a whole, this supports the idea that capability expansions or restrictions are shaped by a variety of explanatory factors, both internal and external.

An unexpected outcome from this preliminary research is that, while the original hypothesis expected aspiration outcomes to be impacted by certain explanatory variables in an internship experience, the above data did not support this case. Instead, most of the data pointed to factors having close to 0 relationship with outcomes. No single factor had a strong positive or negative relationship with the outcome of aspirations. This makes sense considering self-reported aspirations, as respondents' responses generally followed a bell curve that only slightly skewed to the right. That began to suggest that internships do not have an impact on aspirations, or at least impact aspirations very little. But for capabilities, respondents more confidently responded in the affirmative: that they felt more professionally capable in the internship as compared to before.

Interestingly, considering the responses of self-reported outcomes, the two most popular results were that either interns had a stronger idea of what they did or didn't want to do, indicating higher results of career clarity. Behind that, interns reported no concrete outcomes over a reference, a professional contact, or, most interestingly, a job offer. In fact, out of 39 respondents, only 6 received job offers. This suggests that while internships may contribute to reflection and adjustments for how respondents perceive their next career steps, they might not necessarily be a segue to immediate employment outcomes.

The immediate survey responses, such as how respondents' answers to the prompts of their perceived changes in aspirations, capabilities, results, and internship ratings, were cross-referenced with the results that the respondents provided for the Likert-scale prompts regarding explanatory factors. The single most confident result is that those who received higher levels of mentorship overall rated the internship experience higher. Similarly, respondents who reported that they had a reasonable workload also tended to rate internships more highly. This seems to suggest that interns who feel psychologically safe and capable in their work environment are more likely to positively perceive their internship. Other factors showed moderate correlations

and shouldn't be disregarded, as they still represented a moderate level of correlation. And finally, among all measured factors, the opportunity for an intern to use their pre-existing skills had the weakest correlation with internship ratings.

Lastly, regarding capabilities, the notable correlations were with a respondent's ability to maintain their health, coping skills, confidence in completing the internship, a reasonable workload, and tutor feedback. It is important to note, however, that these factors are considered moderate, suggesting that they have some extent of a relationship with aspiration. Also interestingly, factors such as using pre-existing skills or feeling welcomed into an organization showed almost no correlation with changes in capabilities.

Overall, the above data collected from the survey and analyzed through the correlation matrix suggest that an intern's well-being throughout the internship, as well as the presence of quality mentorship, are both consistently relevant. It is important as well to note that well-being – as suggested by confidence, health, and coping mechanisms – may also be influenced by the environment. An environment conducive to stress may test an intern's well-being, and it may change in response. This interaction between personal and explanatory variables is nuanced and thus calls for further research regarding the connections that personal and explanatory variables have on capability expansion or restriction.

4.2 Primary Data – Interviews

4.2.1 General Overview of Interview Results

Naturally, the interviews provided further valuable insight to complement the survey data collected. For this study, eight participants agreed to take part in the interviews. In a respondent-led conversation, respondents were encouraged to elaborate on topics such as what surprised them the most about their internship, the most notable things, how they felt it impacted them, and their perceptions of the future.

For the most succinct presentation of the interview data, the study presents the following chart, which shows the categories of data collected from each anonymized participant:

| Interview Data Gathered | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|---|--|--|---|---|------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|
| Data Collected | Anonymized Respondent | | | | | | | | |
| | | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H |
| | Role clarity | Clear, evolved | Static, repetitive | Limited role clarity | Clear research role | Very rigid, predefined | Moderate, somewhat academic | Clear but becomes repetitive | Clear, bureaucratic |
| | Supervision | Minimal supervision | Minimal supervision | Inconsistent and lacking (absent supervisor) | Supportive mentor | Weak mentorship | Strong feedback (manager) | Gradual independence from mentor | Low |
| | Autonomy | High | Very high | Medium | High | Low (strict rules) | Medium | Increasing over time | Low (strict rules) |
| | Work Environment + Culture | Friendly, young | Isolated but flexible | Fragmented, impersonal | Professional and friendly | Bureaucratic, stressful | Social exclusionary, cold | Collaborative | Highly collaborative |
| | Social Integration | High, developed strong connections | Had peers (friends) working alongside the respondent | Weak | Strong (international exposure) | Moderate (developed friendships with coworkers) | Very weak (exclusion) | Strong | High, but needed boundaries |
| | Key Challenge | Impostor syndrome | Repetition and static nature | Lack of feedback and emotional stress | Language barrier | Stress + poor leadership | Discrimination & isolation | Workload pressure | Navigating social dynamics |
| | Skill Development | Marketing | Patience, time management | Emotional resilience | Research + confidence | Organization + boundaries | Writing + credibility | Technical + soft skills | Patience |
| | Career Impact | Embraced the company, working there still | Increased interest in another direction | Ruled out field for work | Ruled out PhD, continued interest in research | Rejected office work | Led to research career later | Ruled out lab career | Continued work in same field |
| | Compensation | Paid with benefits | Unpaid | Unpaid | Unpaid (but respondent felt ok with this) | Paid | Unpaid | Mostly unpaid | Paid |
| | Alignment with Studies | Very low | Medium | High | High | High | High | High | Medium |
| | Workload and Structure | Highly flexible, moderate work load | Flexible | Rigid presence | Flexible | Very rigid | Moderate | High workload at end | Moderate |
| | Main negative factor | Lack of training | Repetition | Lack of supervision | Language barrier | Leadership issues | Discrimination | Repetitiveness | Struggled to function with lack of supervision |
| Main Positive Factor | Strong fit | Autonomy | Emotional growth | Exposure + mentorship | Skill discipline | Career clarity | Team collaboration | Help people directly | |

Figure 12: Anonymized Interview Data

4.2.2 Discussion of Interviews

In general, the interviews were quite insightful for qualitative data, and all respondents gave consent regarding their privacy and data processing for this study. The respondents across the board represented a wide range of skills, roles, industries, and outcomes. Two interviews illustrate the spectrum of internship experiences in Italy, highlighting the generally positive and negative cases.

Respondent A holistically considered their internship a success for themselves, both as a learning experience and for their career aspirations. For Respondent A, their internship was completely unrelated to what they studied for their master's degree. However, they credited their outcomes to a few key factors: the organization as a startup, with a young ambiance, friendly social connections, and the overall welcoming nature of the internship. The respondent emphasized that the less rigid structure, in comparison to a corporate environment structure, allowed them to feel comfortable enough to take initiative, try new tasks, and step outside their comfort zone. This person said that this hands-on internship allowed them to discover their fit, which would not have been known from education alone. The main challenges that arose from this person's experience was impostor syndrome, particularly when they compared themselves to similar peers who struggled to secure an internship. This respondent indicated that they did not feel any more deserving than their similarly capable peers to have such a work opportunity. Besides challenges, they cited that benefits, including pay and flexible hours, were appreciated. However, they ultimately credited the organizational structure as the primary force behind their outcomes of a pleasant experience, expanded capabilities, and expanded aspiration to continue working in this line of work. And ultimately, Respondent A confirmed that they indeed do work at the same place after the conclusion of their internship.

Contrastingly, Respondent F highlighted how their aspirations were restricted as a result of their internship experience. As a non-Italian studying in Italy, their internship story started with significant difficulties finding an internship, even though they believed they had the relevant skills and qualifications. They reported discrimination during interview processes for internships, with some interviewers asking irrelevant questions about their origin instead of asking about their qualifications. When the respondent ultimately found an internship, they continued to experience significant issues that impacted their outcomes. This person reported that they were photographed for promotional materials to demonstrate diversity, while they

explicitly felt excluded from colleagues in the social atmosphere. They reported that despite being in a small team, they felt isolated with minimal interaction beyond basic greetings. They felt to be made as “other”, which they then reported to increase self-doubt when applying for jobs. This is one clear moment where an intern’s experience led to a decrease in capabilities – they doubted themselves and their ability to find a job.

While on opposite ends of the spectrum, these two interviews highlight a finding not readily visible from the correlation chart or preliminary results from the survey data: that respondents are attributing their success, or lack thereof, to a welcoming social environment where they were able to feel psychologically safe and belonging, or not. And more importantly, it humanizes the data collected.

Another interesting result from the internship arose: almost every single interviewee independently confirmed that, regarding internship outcomes, it showed them what they *didn’t* want to do. Whether it was a certain element of work or a complete career trajectory, most respondents found that their internship was an educational experience for the elimination of future job prospects. When combining this with the correlation data from the Likert scale questions, this is particularly interesting because it originally appeared that none of the proposed factors directly impacted a decrease or an increase in perceived career prospects. What this interview suggests is that the measurements shouldn’t *decrease* or *increase*, but rather a *reorientation* of perceived career direction.

Other interviews showed a collection of other notable findings: the internships of Respondents A, D, and G were impactful because they offered role evolution with increasing possibility for growth. Other internship experiences, like B, E, and partially G, showed that static or repetitive roles didn’t have as much value.

Other factors, like autonomy, had mixed results. It appears that when autonomy is given *at the same time* as high-quality mentorship, it leads to increased confidence, like the experiences of D and F. However, high autonomy with a *lack of or not present* mentorship, in the cases of B and C, tended to lead toward confusion and frustration.

4.3 Secondary Data

Whereas the primary data is a sample of Italian internship experiences and outcomes, secondary data collected from the ILO gives a higher-level perspective of European internships.

Furthermore, the OECD provides insights on the trends in the latest years regarding youth employment and their challenges, again both in Italy and compared to the larger institutional averages. In the end, secondary data from the ILO and OECD will be compared with the primary results to create more nuanced insights to Italian internships and their outcomes.

4.3.1 ILO

To begin, one of the most interesting publications regarding the transition from education to work via internships is the ILO's publication *Interns Revealed: a Survey on Internship Quality in Europe* by Porcaro et. al³⁰. They highlight several key characteristics of European internships as a whole:

The interns in this survey are generally highly educated and go to great lengths to get work experience, including for little or no pay. They often do more than one internship and are very mobile compared to the average European worker. Most are in their twenties and internships typically last between 4 and 6 months. Although most interns have contracts, 3 out of 4 receive no or insufficient compensation. This does not vary between sectors and implies that the issue is widespread (Porcaro et al. 40).

In addition to commenting on the high education and effort to receive while gaining little or no compensation, they remain highly mobile. They also note:

If internships continue to be treated as an unregulated domain somewhere between education and work, they will be available only to those with access to external financial resources. This means that families and young people already at the margin of society will lose out and as a result, a gap between privileged and non-privileged students and labour market entrants could develop. (Porcaro et al. 40).

This observation of internships underscores a theme of precarity and privilege: that internships may benefit those with the privilege to afford low pay, whereas those who do not have the financial means to support a low-paying internship may not take an internship opportunity. This connects directly with Appadurai's *Capacity to Aspire*, in that financial restrictions may inhibit one's ability to pursue a field of their desire.

³⁰ While this publication was released in 2011, and search results did not yield a more recent update of this publication, the themes may still be relevant for consideration. The statistics provided will not be treated as contemporary, updated findings.

Furthermore, Porcaro et. al emphasize the importance of a stable income for young people transitioning to adulthood:

“Not being able to plan for the future with a stable income to rely on is highly likely to have serious consequences for young people ready to start adult life. Therefore, when researching the transition from education to employment, it is absolutely essential to follow up those who found a job and find out what type of contract they were offered and if they managed to stay employed” (Porcaro et al. 41).

For the case of Italy, this underscores the relevance of continued research on the impact of internships. These findings from the ILO: how unpaid internships may be precarious and inequitable for those who cannot afford a low-income, will be further discussed in relevance with the primary data collected.

In continuing this notion of precarity, Porcaro et al. elaborate:

“While it on the one hand seems that employers are taking advantage of high youth unemployment rates across Europe by demanding work experience even for entry-level positions, it is also necessary to ask whether educational institutions are neglecting their responsibility to prepare young students for the labour market. If this is the case, internships, if adequately regulated, could take on a positive role in mending deficiencies in this area (Porcaro et al. 39)

And here, they denote that internships as a mechanism may not be problematic; rather, regulation and ensuring of high-quality explanatory factors may create an environment that becomes a catalyst for learning, entering the labor market, and ultimately the potential to expand one’s capabilities.

In the end, this publication from the ILO emphasizes that education certainly has value, but they suggest that there may be a gap between education and the skills needed in the workforce. This publication by Porcaro et. al. was the most complete findings reported by the ILO regarding the state of European internships, their potential, and what issues may need to be addressed to enhance their efficacy.

4.3.2 OECD

Whereas the previous section drew on the ILO’s publication highlighting broad structural issues and pitfalls of internships across Europe, the OECD provides a larger statistical

perspective, allowing for comparisons between Italy and other member states in terms of youth education, labor market participation, and employment. Consulting OECD data helps contextualize the Italian labor market for young people, who are often the same demographic of people seeking internships. While internships are not directly addressed in most OECD publications, youth labor market conditions provide insight into these environments in which internships operate. It is also important to consider that these results should be interpreted alongside post-COVID-19 OECD reports for the most up-to-date scope.

The first relevant element the OECD reports on regarding Italian youth is the topic of education. They find, “In Italy, 17% of 25-34 year-olds hold a master’s or equivalent degree, which is similar to the OECD average of 16%. This represents a small increase since 2019, when the share was 16%” (OECD, *Education at a Glance 2025: Italy 2*). Overall, this statistic affirms that Italian youth represent a very similar rate of higher education, which is relevant to consider in transitioning from education to the workforce. However, despite this element of higher education, the OECD’s 2019 report, *Strengthening Active Market Policies in Italy*, identifies multiple challenges affecting young Italians entering the workforce. For example, one primary issue in the Italian context is on unemployment: they mainly highlight that the rate of unemployment of Italian youth is much higher in comparison to other OECD countries (OECD 2019: 38). More specifically, from the 2023 or the latest available year, the OECD reports that Italy had one of the highest unemployment rates for youth: 14.7%, compared to the OECD average of 8.9% (OECD, *OECD Youth Policy Toolkit*). So, despite relatively average education levels, Italian youth have a disproportionately higher unemployment rate.

In the same sense, there are other factors to consider in addition to youth unemployment in Italy. More specifically, the OECD has highlighted NEET rates of youth: the percentage of 15-29 year olds not in employment, education, or training (OECD, *OECD Youth Policy Toolkit*). The referenced toolkit collects data from 38 OECD countries for comparison. While this does not directly correspond with Italian internships, it provides some insight to the Italian context through which we can interpret data. The 2024 average NEET rate for OECD countries was 12.8%. Similarly to unemployment, Italy’s average was higher than the OECD average at 16.2%. Of 41 countries, only 5 countries had a NEET rate higher than Italy: Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Türkiye, and Romania (OECD, *OECD Youth Policy Toolkit*). Between the considerably higher than average NEET rate and unemployment for Italy, this would indicate that youth are having a

particularly difficult time finding employment, as seen in both the unemployment and NEET rate, despite youth being on par with the OECD average for education. This reveals a dynamic where, despite education, securing employment is particularly difficult for youth in Italy.

Given this discrepancy between relatively high levels of advanced education and youth unemployment and NEET rates, the OECD reports on a 2022 intervention to improve these conditions. They report:

In 2024, after several years of recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic, the average NEET rate across OECD countries was 14%, similar to the value recorded in 2019. Italy saw the most significant drop, with an 8 percentage-point decrease, followed closely by Brazil and Chile. These decreases in NEET rates might indicate that mechanisms to support youth transitions into work, education or training, such as Italy's NEET Working Plan which was adopted in 2022, have been effective in improving individual pathways into employment or education for youth (OECD, *Education at a Glance 2025: Italy*).

Despite the intervention of Italy's NEET Working Plan in 2022, market instability and overall unfavorable conditions for youth in Italy persist to be a significant matter.

Finally, beyond employment statistics and findings, the OECD highlights the perceptions and lived experiences of the youth who navigate these challenges. They find that, on the general topic of youth labor force young people as a whole, as of 2024, 69% are concerned about their ability to pay expenses in the short run, 29% believe it is likely or lose their job or employment in the short run, and three-quarters would like to see more government action to secure their socio-economic security and well-being (OECD, *Risks That Matter for Young People 5*). And this is considering the collective sentiments of youth in OECD countries.

In addition, they note: "Young people can face significant income volatility during the transition from education to work, for example, due to temporary contracts, low-paid jobs, a high risk of dismissal, and periods of unemployment. It becomes problematic when they cannot rely on financial support from their families and have limited savings (OECD, *Risks That Matter for Young People 2024*). This quotation highlights temporary contracts and low-paying positions, as internships may be generally considered, reflect a precarious transition from education to work.

4.3.3 Discussion of ILO and OECD Secondary Data

Both results of the ILO and the OECD highlight the theme of tension in internship experiences. In the end, Italian youth may have average levels of advanced education for youth,

but they disproportionately experience higher than average unemployment and NEET rates. This may indicate that formal education on its own does not guarantee immediate access to employment after graduation. This reflects on the ILO's *Interns Revealed* Publication, which says that for Europeans overall, even if they have advanced education and are mobile, they experience precarious internships that create inequities for those who cannot afford low-paid or unpaid opportunities.

In addition to this gap between education and the labor market, both sources have touched on internships as a precarious moment. Between insufficient compensation, lack of evidence of internships leading directly to employment, and overall unfavorable youth labor market conditions, the ILO and OECD together paint a picture that the Italian labor market is a particularly challenging place for youth, where internships in their current state may not be the catalyst for labor market participation. But – as the *Interns Revealed* publication emphasized – adequate regulation and structuring of an internship might be a solution to creating higher quality outcomes regarding the labor market, which may ultimately connect with expanded capacities and aspirations. In the end, these findings suggest that while advanced education is a foundation for entering the labor market, the current state of Italian internships does not fully address challenges for youth employment.

4.4 Tertiary Data

When considered together, the tertiary data presented by Binelli, Romanò and Nazio, Arcidiacono, and Tzanakou et al. bring forth relevant data on the specific case of Italian internships, whereas the primary data collected only a sample, and the ILO and OECD tended to give higher-level trends and results. Collectively, their publications paint the picture of internships as an unstable place between education and work.

4.4.1 Findings from Contemporary Authors

Collectively, the results of these authors show that internships are a place where young people in the labor force feel the effects of uncertainty and precarity, deal with ambiguous expectations, and have different results depending on their social position, gender, and institutional context. The literature doesn't deny the potential value internships might have. But rather, it shows that internships – specifically in Italy - may be conditional, unevenly distributed,

and impacted by weaknesses in the Italian labor market and the transition from education to work.

Binelli's findings partially concern youth perspectives and feelings in finding a job after education: "Italian jobless young skilled perceive substantial job instability, insecurity and earnings risk, which correlate with several important choices and behaviors, and depend on individual characteristics rather than on local labor market conditions (Binelli 201). In this sense, Binelli shows that their research has concluded that Italian young people internalize job market conditions. This is to say, it is a sentiment felt by a larger population of young people. These feelings are made even more clear when this author says that, "The results show that jobless Italian young skilled perceive substantial job instability, insecurity and risk with 60% of the young expecting low chances of finding a job in the next 12 months and 80% facing low prospects of finding a job that offers adequate health insurance and pension benefits" (Binelli 228).

Romanò and Nazio add perspective to the state of Italian internships with their findings, particularly that the internship's format may impact their outcome, depending on the format. They conclude from their research:

With regard to the educational system and the characteristics of job supply, while curricular internships do not appear to directly influence career paths, they play important roles beyond professionalization by training and orienting students. They afford students practical exposure to the working environment and contribute to better-informed career planning and the development of professional networks. Extracurricular internships, on the other hand, can expedite employment but increase overeducation risks, indicating the need to enhance better outbound guidance services. (Romanò and Nazio 406).

While this study did not thoroughly discern between curricular internships and extracurricular internships, further research is suggested based on these findings from Romanò and Nazio.

One of the most poignant researchers who has conducted research on this topic is Davide Arcidiacono. Arcidiacono highlights in his publication, *Post-Graduation Internship between Exploitation and Training: A Research on the Italian Experience*, a few primary issues with the state of Italian internships; through his research, he has found, "Data seem to confirm a serious shortage of the educational value of internship that, instead, would be the first objective of this tool, distinguishing it from ordinary forms of employment" (Arcidiacono, "Post-Graduation

Internship” 180). His analysis and research demonstrated that in the Italian case, mentorship is particularly lacking – the assigned tutor, or supervisor for the intern, “plays mainly the role of a ‘bureaucrat’, rather than embodies the role of a guarantor and coach/mentor of the training process of the intern” (Arcidiacono, “Post-Graduation Internship”180). In fact, he finds that from his research, “a tutor, as an insider, may perceive trainees as entrants and he fears that their presence could threaten his position in the company” (Arcidiacono, “Post-Graduation Internship”181).

In another of Arcidiacono’s published paper, *Between Training and Work Experience: the Effectiveness of Post-graduate Internships and Placement Services* his findings highlight a few other factors as notable issues in the state of Italian internships. He finds that there is role ambiguity, “where there is an evident mismatch between the conditions in which interns operate and the expectations of bosses and colleagues about the tasks they are there to perform.” (Arcidiacono, “Between Training and Work Experience” 31). He poignantly also notes that interns are expected to embody the role of an internal body of the company, while still maintaining an “outsider” (Arcidiacono, “Between Training and Work Experience” 31) role. In this entry, Arcidiacono underlines key critical issues of Italian internships:

The data analyzed show that companies expect interns to be fully committed to the values and corporate culture of the company, a total willingness to extend the time or the content of their job as well as the ability to work independently [...] In practice, however, interns do not receive adequate training, instead remaining confined to the specific aspects of the job, and neither do they gain an overall knowledge of how the business operates which could, to a certain extent, limit their operational capacity and understanding of the ‘production’ processes in the company. This lack of training and supervision, combined with exclusion from meeting, events or corporate training, as well as the lack of access to tools and facilities reserved for the staff, may well reinforce the discomfort of interns, weakening their commitment and their capacity to learn (Arcidiacono, “Between Training and Work Experience” 31)

In summary, through his research, Arcidiacono highlights some serious gaps in the state of Italian internships – trends of lacking mentorship, ambiguity, psychological contracts, etc. heighten the state of precarity for internships. Thus, together, these have the potential to weaken interns’ capacities to learn. Triangulating this with other data may provide interesting results.

Tzanakou et al. also wrote their own publication, which examined how internships undertaken during higher education affect graduates' labor market outcomes in Italy and United Kingdom, which provides a comparative angle. Their research results are broadly positive in the sense that internships may improve labor market conditions after graduation, but their findings regarding the Italian case are a bit more cautious. "We found no evidence that internships positively affect the probability of obtaining a graduate job in Italy [...] This complements the results we reported in a working paper: [...] in Italy participation in the 'best' internships is substantially gendered" (Tzanakou et al. 74). These results provide a critical perspective to the claim that internships generally improve employability. In the case of Italian internships, the benefits of an internship appear limited and impacted by gender. This suggests that Italian internships don't offer straightforward, immediate rewards, but instead, they play into inequalities of who gets the better internship and who doesn't, especially in the case of gender.

4.4.2 Discussion of Tertiary Data

When considered all together, the above authors and their research findings paint a picture that is coherent but critical of internships. Internships in Italy may be thought of as transitional moments that give young people relevant skills and work experience while transitioning from higher education to work. However, the above evidence shows that they are not equally productive or accessible. In fact, it highlights the theme that while internships may have a high potential for an intern to gain skills and learn, Italian cases do not fulfill that potential. Thus, some interns may be experiencing mediocre experiences that do not make for the best learning environment. Some internships offer clarity and networking opportunities, others are catalysts for employment but at the cost of overeducation, and many may suffer from weak mentoring, unclear expectations, and limited training while expecting the full commitment of the psychological contract. The main issue from these results then raises the curiosity of why these Italian internships are so divisive. Considered as tertiary evidence, these authors collectively show that internships in Italy are not all created equal. They may facilitate, or even inhibit, labor market entry - and they may be a place of insecurity, exploitation, and inequality.

4.5 Synthesis and Discussion: All Data Considered

The survey data can be summarized as follows: the survey correlation table indicated that there are observable relationships between several hypothesized factors, internship ratings, and

perceived capability expansion. However, somewhat unexpectedly, the hypothesized factors did not seem to have an impact on aspirations. Preliminary findings showed that internships appear polarized, rather than normally distributed. In other words, respondents to the survey tended to rate their experiences either quite positively or quite negatively, with few moderate responses in between. This provides a general idea of how internships are perceived within the population sampled.

In terms of outcomes, the most frequently reported result was increased clarity, specifically that respondents felt that they had a better understanding of what they did or did not want to pursue in the future. Beyond this, it was more common for internships to result in no concrete outcomes than in other benefits such as references, professional contacts, or job offers. This is a notable finding, as it suggests internships may function more as reflective experiences rather than direct pathways to employment.

The interviews conducted alongside the survey further highlighted the disparities in internship experiences. Specifically, they highlighted the significance of a healthy social work environment as being a key explanatory variable for having had the strongest impact. This appeared not only to impact satisfaction but also perceived professional development.

Considering the secondary data from the ILO and OECD, this study may further examine the data's implications. Both the ILO and OECD underline the broader precarity of internships and the structural gap between education and entry to the workforce. Specifically regarding OECD data, it showed that the Italian youth labor market is characterized by comparatively high NEET and employment rates, despite Italy's relatively average rate of advanced education. This suggests that internships operate within an already challenging labor market context, where transitions into stable employment are uncertain.

Finally, the tertiary data from existing literature reinforces and deepens these observations. Binelli's findings highlight that Italian youth experience significant anxiety regarding job stability and prospects, reflecting a climate of uncertainty and precarity. Arcidiacono's research is particularly revealing, since it points to a structural contraction with Italian internships: while interns are expected to demonstrate commitment, they frequently receive limited mentorship and guidance. As indicated in the primary data, mentorship has a correlation with internship ratings and capability expansion. As demonstrated by Arcidiacono's findings, this imbalance undermines potential learning and potential capability expansion.

Romanò and Nazio add further nuance, suggesting that even different formats of internships – curricular vs extracurricular – may lead to different outcomes. And finally, Tzanakou et al. show that internships in Italy do not necessarily improve the likelihood of securing employment, especially with gendered access to opportunity.

Conclusion

All things considered, this study finds that internships act as a significant moment in the transition from education to work. More specifically, the results suggest that factors such as quality mentorship, autonomy, and feeling welcomed in the work environment are among the most influential elements of shaping overall internship experiences and, to some extent, capability development. This aligns partially with Human Capital Theory in that some internships can enhance skills and readiness to enter the labor market, but the results from the above research suggest that acquiring skills in and of itself does not fully explain interns' experiences or outcomes. At the same time, certain hypothesized factors – such as the opportunity to use pre-existing skills – appear to have little to no impact on outcomes. Most notably, while several variables showed some level of association with internship ratings and capabilities, aspirations appear to change trajectory, rather than expanding or restricting as a result of internship experiences. This finding resonates with Appadurai's Capacity to Aspire, in that aspirations are shaped by exposure, mentorship, and overall ability to imagine future opportunities.

This exploratory analysis ultimately demonstrates the presence of a substantial research gap in understanding how internships influence not only skills and outcomes, but also long-term aspirations. This is particularly relevant in contexts such as Italy, where relatively high levels of advanced education face high youth unemployment and NEET rates. Internships may address part of this gap by providing experience, but they also appear to be enmeshed with broader structural issues, including overeducation, skill mismatches, and limited transitions into stable full-time employment. These conditions indicate unfavorable youth labor market conditions, and emphasize the potential internships have to be the opportunity that can launch a young professional into their career. It is also important to note that from a Value of Education perspective, these internships are not solely an instrumental CV detail. Instead, internships act as an educational experience should be considered through the lens of well-being, which justifies

why they should be of high quality. Not just for economic outcomes, but for intrinsic outcomes as well.

Within this context, the findings point toward a more complex dynamic. Psychological pressure in the form of the psychological contract and *La Gavetta* signifies that interns in Italy are implicitly expected to demonstrate high levels of commitment and adaptability. However, this investment of the intern does not appear to be consistently rewarded. A substantial proportion of respondents reported dedicating significant efforts to internships that did not result in employment opportunities, provided limited mentorship, or offered inadequate to no compensation. Circling back to the Capability Approach, it shows that the mere presence of a task or internship does not guarantee the expansion of freedoms, functionings, or capabilities, where poor internship structures limit possibilities for growth. This disconnect is further reflected in the finding that only 35.89% (Annex Item 9) would confidently do their internship all over again.

In the end, while internships can serve as a valuable tool for acquiring experience and navigating the transition into the labor market, their effectiveness is highly connected to their quality. The findings of this study consistently point towards the importance of well-structured internships, particularly those that provide strong mentorship, supportive environments, and meaningful learning opportunities. In fact, these findings suggest that both instrumental³¹ and intrinsic³² elements of internships deserve attention when they are being organized. Without these elements, internships risk falling short of their potential, ultimately reinforcing underlying themes of precarity and inequality in early career trajectories. This is why it is important to consider internships as consequential institutions: they influence matters beyond basic skill acquisition. Instead, they have significant potential to shape young people and their capabilities. Through the lens of the Capability Approach and the Capacity to Aspire, this study overall shows that internships can act as sites where the freedom and ability to pursue one's goals may experience expansion or restriction, depending on the structural nature of the structural organization and quality of the experience. Understanding this broader impact is essential for shaping future research and for enabling universities, policymakers, and internship hosts to make internships a fairer and more effective mechanism for early career

³¹ , such as skill development,

³² , such as personal development and capability expansion,

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Annex

Annex Item 1: Universities Contacted for Collaboration

Politecnico di Milano, Università degli Studi di Milano, Università Commerciale Bocconi, Università degli Studi di Milano–Bicocca. SDA Bocconi, Politecnico di Torino, Università degli Studi di Torino, Università degli Studi di Brescia, Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna, Università degli Studi di Padova, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, IUAV di Venezia, Università degli Studi di Verona, Università degli Studi di Udine, Università degli Studi di Trento, Sapienza Università di Roma, LUISS Guido Carli, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Università degli Studi di Firenze, Università di Pisa Sant'Anna. Università di Pisa Scuola Normale, Università di Siena, Università Politecnica delle Marche, Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II, Università degli Studi di Salerno, Università degli Studi del Molise, Università degli Studi dell'Aquila, Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro, Politecnico di Bari, Università degli Studi di Palermo, Università degli Studi di Catania, Università degli Studi di Messina, Università degli Studi di Sassari, and the Università degli Studi di Ferrara.

Annex Item 2: UNIPV Master's Departments Contacted for Collaboration

Agri-Food Sustainability, Antichità Classiche e Orientali, Bioingegneria, Biologia Sperimentale Ed Applicata. Biotecnologie Avanzate, Chimica, Civil Engineering For Mitigation Of Risk From Natural Hazards, Computer Engineering, Comunicazione Digitale, Conservazione Della Biodiversità, Didattica E Comunicazione Scientifica, Diritto Della Prevenzione, Dell'Innovazione E Della Sicurezza Per Le Imprese E L'Amministrazione Pubblica, Economia E Gestione Delle Imprese, Economia E Legislazione D'Impresa, Economics, Development And Innovation, Electrical Engineering, Electronic Engineering, European Languages, Cultures And Societies In Contact, Filologia Moderna, Filosofia, Finance, Geoscienze Per Lo Sviluppo, Sostenibile, Governo, Amministrazione E Territorio, Industrial Automation Engineering, Industrial Nanobiotechnologies For Pharmaceuticals, Ingegneria Biomedica, Ingegneria Civile, Ingegneria Computazionale E Modellistica Per Materiali, Strutture E Tecnologie Sostenibili, Ingegneria Per L'Ambiente E Il Territorio, International Business And Entrepreneurship, Lifelong Well-Being And Healthy Aging, Lingue E Letterature Per La Comunicazione Interculturale, Linguistica Teorica, Applicata E Delle Lingue Moderne, Matematica, Medical And Pharmaceutical Biotechnologies, Metodi E Tecnologie Per La Storia Dell'Arte, Molecular

Biology And Genetics, Musicologia, Neurobiology, Psicologia, Psychology, Neuroscience And Human Sciences, Scienze E Tecniche Delle Attività Motorie Preventive E Adattate, Scienze E Tecniche Dello Sport, Scienze Fisiche, Scienze Infermieristiche E Ostetriche, Scritture E Progetti Per Le Arti Visive E Performative, Storia E Valorizzazione Dei Beni Culturali, Storia Globale Delle Civiltà E Dei Territori, Studi Dell'Africa E Dell'Asia, Sviluppo Economico E Relazioni Internazionale, The Ancient Mediterranean World. History, Archaeology And Art, World Politics And International Relations.

IL TUO STAGE É ANDATO COSÌ?



La tua esperienza può fare la differenza nella mia tesi.

5 minuti, anonimo, facile - e qualcuno vincerà un buono da 20€.

Sto facendo una ricerca per capire quando uno stage funziona davvero e quando invece non funziona. Voglio fare luce su questa questione - e la tua risposta farà la differenza.



DID YOUR INTERNSHIP LOOK LIKE THIS?



Your experience could be the difference for my thesis.

*5 minutes, anonymous, easy - and someone will win a **20 euro gift card**.*

I'm conducting research to see when an internship works well, and when it doesn't. I want to shine a spotlight on this matter - and your response could make the difference.



IL TUO STAGE É ANDATO COSÌ?



La tua esperienza può fare la differenza nella mia tesi.

*5 minuti, anonimo, facile - e qualcuno vincerà un **buono da 20€**.*

Sto facendo una ricerca per capire quando uno stage funziona davvero e quando invece non funziona. Voglio fare luce su questa questione - e la tua risposta farà la differenza.



DID YOUR INTERNSHIP LOOK LIKE THIS?



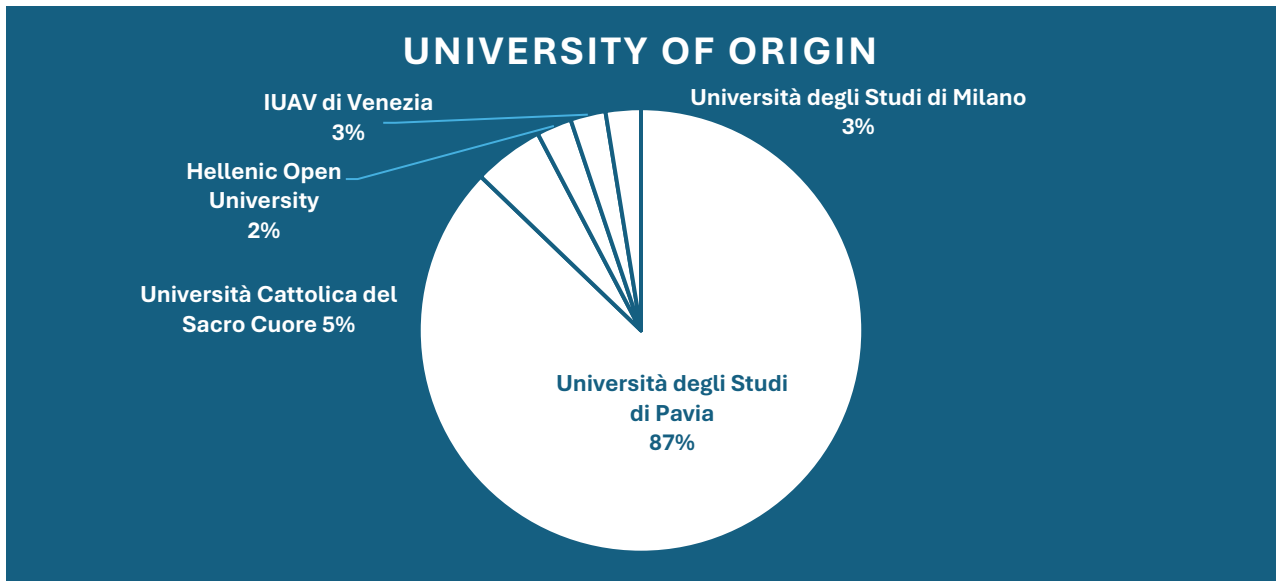
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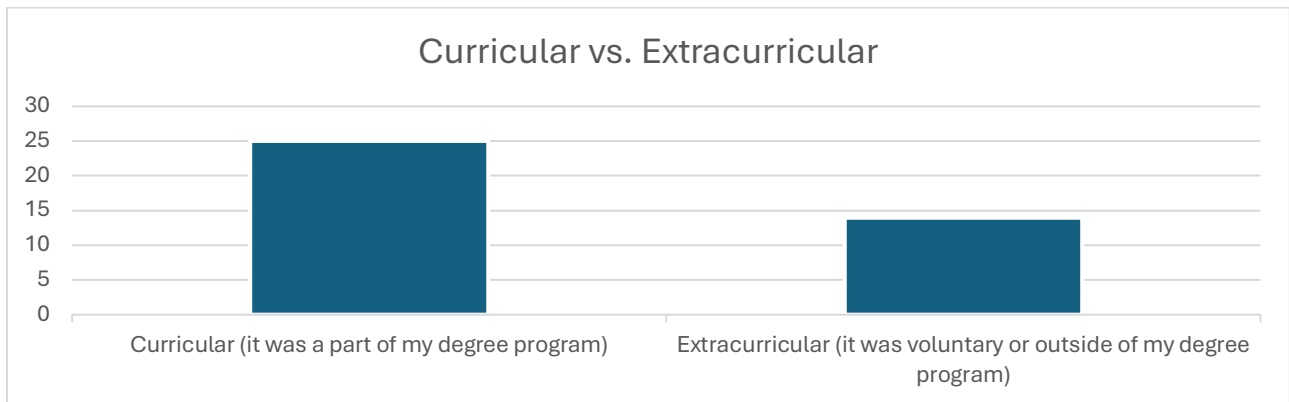
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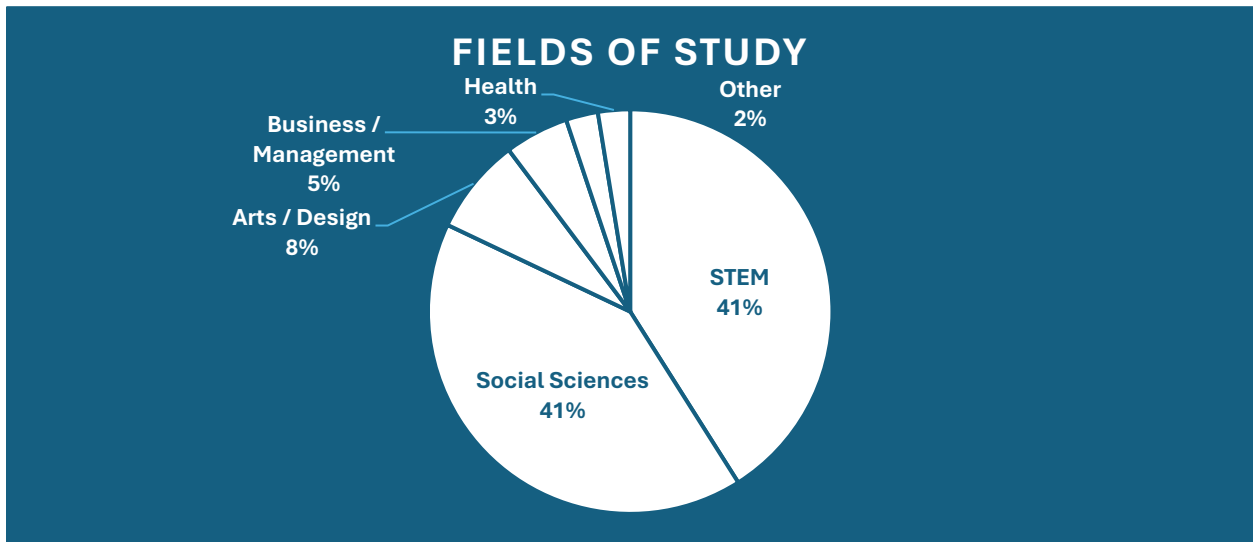
Annex Item 4: University of Origin of Respondents Distribution



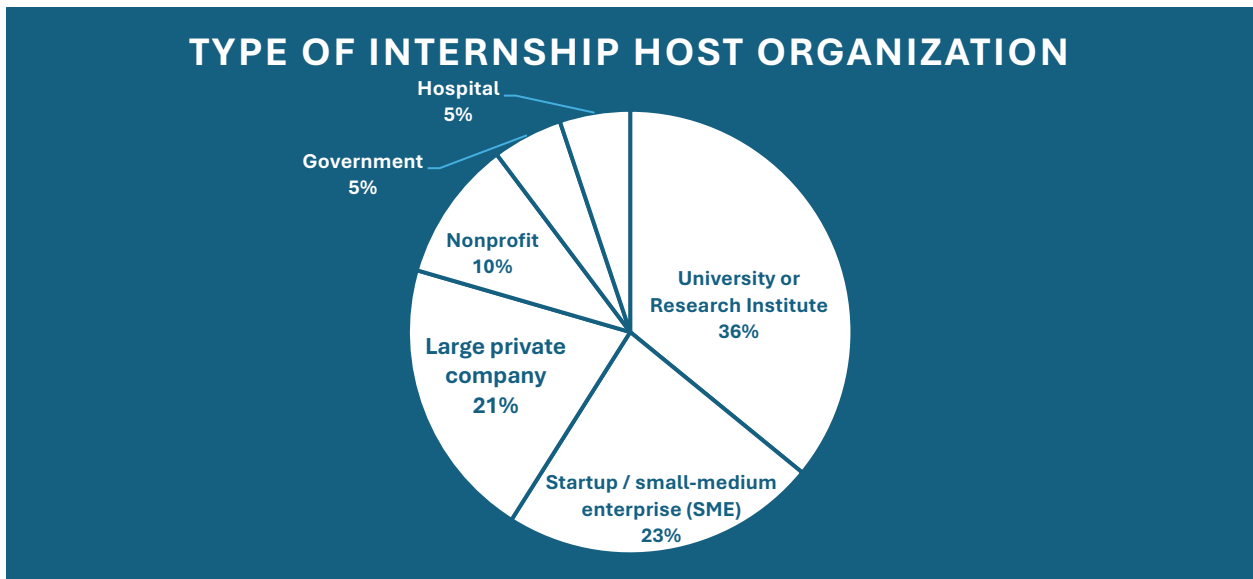
Annex Item 5: Curricular vs Extracurricular Internship Distribution



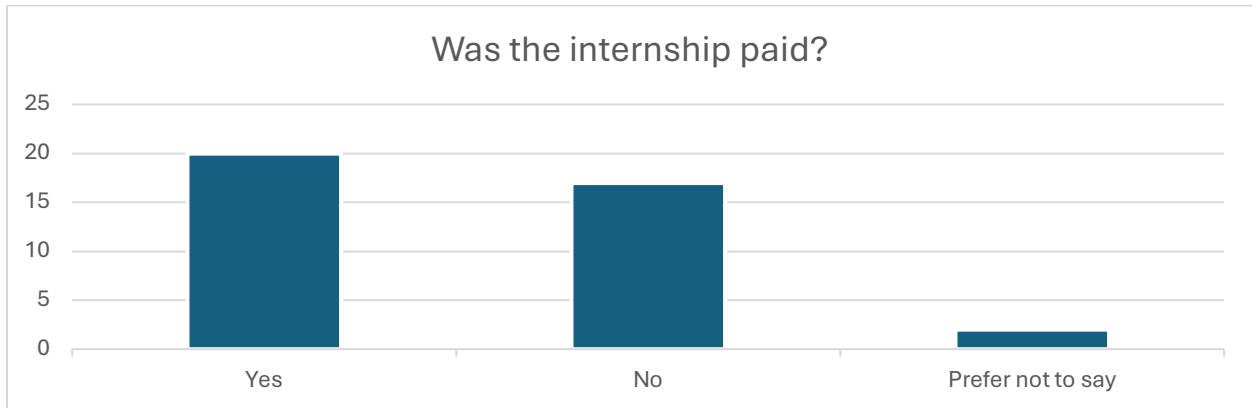
Annex Item 6: Distribution of Fields of Study of the Respondents



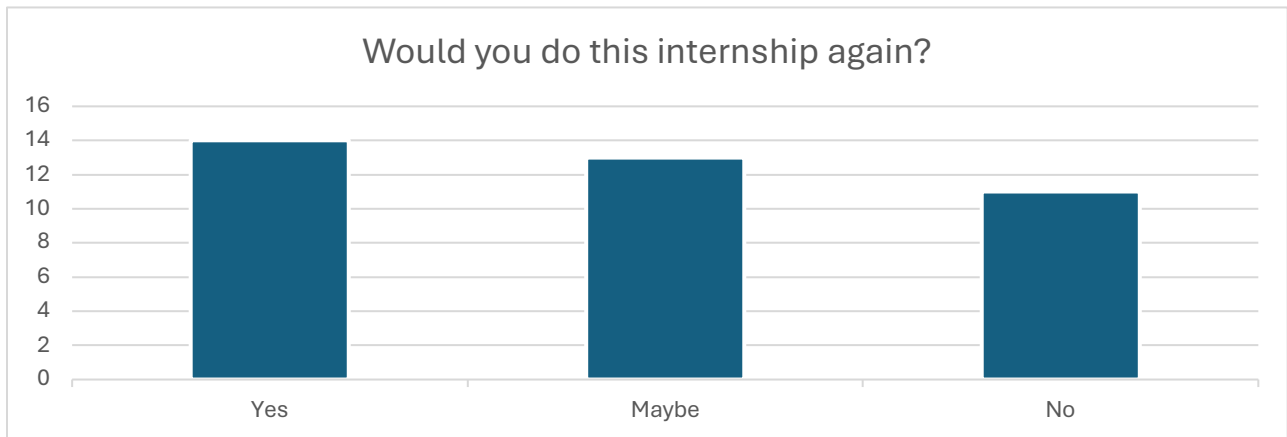
Annex Item 7: Distribution of the Type of Internship Host Organization



Annex Item 8: Proportion of Paid vs. Unpaid Interns



Annex Item 9: Proportion of Respondents Willing to Do Internship Again



Annex Item 10: Likert-Scale Question Prompts

1. Throughout the duration of the internship, I felt welcomed and able to fit into the organization.
2. My supervisor/tutor provided regular, constructive feedback and support.
3. I had autonomy to decide how to carry out my tasks.
4. My workload was reasonable and manageable.
5. My contracted hours were respected.
6. I used and practiced skills I already had.
7. I was fairly compensated relative to my responsibilities.
8. When tasks became stressful, I struggled to cope.
9. I was able to maintain my physical health during this internship.
10. I felt confident I could complete the internship successfully.
11. I learned about job or career opportunities I would not have known otherwise.
12. I gave my strongest effort to perform well during this internship.