

DOES INTERNSHIP MODERATE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CRITICAL THINKING SKILL AND GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY?

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Abstract

Critical thinking skill is one those higher order thinking skills required for the 21st century work place and life. The 21st century job market requires highly skilled employees, who are competent at thinking in diverse angles, conceptualizing and analyzing data and information for the betterment of the organization. Due to this demand for the competency, higher education institutions are expected to design their programs to develop the skills required for the job market including the highly demanded critical thinking skill. One of the most effective ways of inculcating these skills is providing field experiences to students, where they can articulate the knowledge and skill taught in the educational programs, hence internship programs in tertiary education process provides this opportunity to graduates. The purpose of this study is to assess the moderating role of internship in the relationship between critical thinking skills and employability. This research comprises a cross-sectional quantitative research design and adopted structural equation modeling to examine the data collected from employees who were graduates of several HEIs in Maldives. A sample of 313 graduates (undergraduates and postgraduate diploma) were included in the study. The findings indicated that internship was not a significant moderator in the relationship between critical thinking skills and employability. This study contributed to the current literature by considering the moderating

effect of internship in the relationship between critical thinking skills and employability, a variable hitherto not considered in the existing literature.

Key words: *Graduates, Employability, Internship, Critical thinking skill, Higher Education Institutions*

1. Introduction

During the past few decades, the world has undergone considerable changes, and so have the labour market requirements, which have necessitated a variety of both technical and non-technical skills. As a result, there is a growing global interest in how higher education institutions assist students in acquiring employability skills to equip them based on industry preferences (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017; Cheng et al., 2021; Mainga et al., 2022). In this context, many higher education institutions (HEIs) have been reviewing their curricula to incorporate the competences and skills necessary for the global marketplace of the twenty-first century (McMurray et al., 2016; Gallagher & Savage, 2022). Therefore, to meet the changing needs of industry in today's competitive environment, HEIs must have a clear understanding of the skills employers seek in the labour market.

To prosper in the knowledge economy, employers demand a number of soft skills critical for success in the 21st century global marketplace. These include the ability to solve difficult problems involving several disciplines, to think critically and creatively, to work with others, and to use information, opportunities, and expertise to build new services, processes, and products in novel ways (Haryono et al., 2017; Muzam, 2022). In other words, the essential employability skills for the twenty-first century include communication, cooperation, creativity, critical thinking, and ICT literacy or digital literacy. While these skills are essential for employment and professional success in any field (Subramanian, 2017), the industries worldwide observe a shortage of these skills in new graduates (Tang, 2019 & Abas-Mastura et al., 2018).

Among these skills, critical thinking is one of the most important competencies expected of graduates by industry and employers. Critical thinking aims to promote independent thinking, autonomy, and reasoned decision-making. To learn to think critically, one must first understand the subject matter to be evaluated, then identify the issues, information, and assumptions surrounding the problem, conclude with evaluation of alternatives, and reach a conclusion. It comprises the ability to address problems in a more rational and logical manner through comprehensive evaluation and well-supported conclusions (Mogonea & Mogonea, 2019). Critical thinking skills are essential for employees in all professions to perform well, progress, and navigate complex changes (Nold, 2017). In addition to this, Industry 4.0 emphasizes on re-skilling and upskilling of candidates for the industry, where diverse thinking is highly encouraged, hence good critical thinking skill is highly required (Li, 2022).

On the other hand, internship programs that assign students to various organizations so that they can have a practical experience on what they learn theoretically are now being widely recognized as an important means for enhancing graduate employability skills. An effective internship allows students to experience hands-on practices that help them to understand workplace related to their field of study (Anjum, 2020), cultivate students' professional skills and applying theoretical knowledge learnt from the classroom into the occupational environments (Bender, 2020), contribute to their academic and professional development (Anjum, 2020; Galbraith & Mondal, 2020; M. Mars & Hart, 2022), clarify their career choice (Anjum, 2020), and offer new knowledge and experiences to handle various situations (Ali & Khushi, 2018; Bandara, 2020).

Given the substantial benefits of internship programs, HEIs of several countries offer the students with the opportunities to gain field experience as essential components of the academic programs. In the context of Maldives, the higher education system has taken major actions to incorporate graduate attributes such as critical thinking skills into its course accreditation requirements to match the programs of study with industry standards and employer demands (Ministry of Higher Education, Maldives, 2019). Previous studies have shown the significant positive relationship between critical thinking skills and employability (Rios et al., 2020). However, there has been little research on studying the moderating role of internship programs on graduates' critical thinking skills and employability. Therefore, this study aimed the moderating role of internship on graduates' critical thinking and employability with the objective to fill the gap in the existing literature.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings

Experiential learning by Kolb (1984) is one of the related theories in the context of this study. As a result of Kolb's (1984) presentation of the experiential learning theory, the higher education system has experienced considerable transformations. According to this theory, the student is exposed to the workplace, where they immediately experience and acquire profession-related knowledge, skills, and values (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). This theory is based on six academically commonly acknowledged concepts from the period.

This includes:

1. The notion that learning should be understood as a process rather than a product.
2. All learning is relearning, which means that knowledge is formed with the assistance of students' beliefs and ideas, resulting in the growth of more comprehensive and sophisticated ideas.
3. Learning requires diversity, conflicts, and resolutions.
4. Learning is considered a comprehensive process.
5. The key to learning is the integration of the learner with the surrounding environment.
6. The acquisition of knowledge is the definition of learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

This idea of experiential learning depicts that learning is a process, not a product, and that it may be developed, improved, and constructed by interaction with the outside world in the real context. Moreover, through experiential learning, students can acquire the information and skills necessary for employee recruitment (Azar et al., 2020). However, there are two distinct applications of experiential learning in higher education institutions. The first strategy employs experiential learning to incorporate curricular content in the classroom. The alternate option is to include an internship program as a separate module within the course of the program, encouraging students to work for a certain number of hours in order to gain field experience. Both the strategies have a substantial impact on learning.

3. Literature review

3.1 Employability

Employability is the criterion by which businesses and HEI's evaluate the marketability of graduates (Alrifa & Raju, 2019). There are various definitions of employability among various authors. According to Brigestock (2009), the necessary career management skills are required for employability. Furthermore, employability is affected by skill-based indirect barriers depending on the job seeker's social, psychological, or economic hurdles (Holland, 2019). In addition to academic performance, skills are a major determinant of employability (Asefer & Abidin, 2021; (Alam et al., 2022).

It is well acknowledged that there is a discrepancy between employers' expectations from graduates and graduates' work-related skills and abilities. Graduates lack the requisite skills to fulfill the needs of employers. Employers are dissatisfied with graduates' lack of transferable skills and universities' inadequate development of graduates; as a result, higher education institutions (HEIs) are under tremendous labor market pressure (Tang, 2019 & Abas-Mastura et al., 2019).

Due to the absence of 21st century skills among its graduates, the majority of HEIs are required to align their programs with career skills, academics, and support services to increase graduates' employability (Tang, 2019). This issue is significant for the labor market, governments, and higher education institutions (Reddy, 2019 & Ceheng et.al, 2022). When entering the workforce, employers seek graduates with interpersonal skills such as communication, teamwork, critical thinking, and problem solving (Abas-Mastura et al., 2018). In addition to this, HEI's and job market can collaborate to offer work experience, internship, and apprenticeship programs to bridge the gap between education and employability skills and make graduates more employable (Pang et al., 2018 ;McMurray et al., 2016 ; Subramanian, 2017 & Sehgal & Nasim, 2020). Therefore, substantial coordination and communication between HEIs and employers are required to narrow this gap.

3.2 Critical thinking skill

In a competitive job market, critical thinking is one of the important skills to help graduates of HEIs to enter the workforce. Critical thinking plays a crucial role in the development and empowerment of workers on the labor market (Azizi et al., 2017; Indrašienė et al., 2021). For this reason, the labor market of the 21st century expects graduates to possess critical thinking skills that enable them to be instantly productive in the workforce. According to Tiruneh, Verburch, and Elen (2014) critical thinking is one of the most important skills required to distinguish between sensible and non-sensible information. It represents the disposition and ability to engage in activities with reflective skepticism. However, critical thinking also reflects explanation, analysis, and evaluation of conversation, as well as the generation of ideas and search for alternative answers. Moreover, critical thinkers generate crucial questions and answers, organize them effectively, obtain and evaluate pertinent information, employ abstract concepts, and think in an open manner (Duron et al., 2006, Ngang, 2011 & Sarkar et al., 2016).

Moreover, other studies have demonstrated that critical thinking skill is crucial to the success of people in the employment market. According to several studies, there is a considerable correlation between critical thinking ability and professional competency (Azizi et al., 2017; Rios et al., 2020; Tang, 2019). Critical thinking skills were more effectively taught and inculcated in students when they are integrated into other courses and lessons, as opposed to being taught as a separate course. HEIs exert a great deal of effort to improve graduates' critical thinking, as this skill is essential for employability (Tang, 2019). In addition, employers propose modifying university educational practices to expose graduates to more open-ended challenges and expand chances for higher order thinking. Moreover, this competence is found to be lacking in graduate employees, and HEIs need to focus more on developing critical thinking skills in graduates (Sarkar et al., 2016 & Akinbode & Opeyemi, 2020; Wong & Kowitlawakul, 2020; Mainga, Daniel, et al., 2022). Employers have ranked critical thinking as the second most crucial skills for graduates' employability (Baird & Parayitam, 2019). Moreover, critical thinking is one of the rare abilities that employers identified in graduates, however, it is regarded to have a significant impact on the employability of graduates (Tang, 2019; Abosede et al., 2019; Mainga, Daniel, et al., 2022).

3.3 Internship as a moderator

The term 'internship' is synonymous with numerous related concepts that reflect some sort of experiential learning such as practicum, work experience, professional experience, work integrated learning (WIL). The concept of internship is gaining popularity in HEIs and is now considered by many HEIs to be an integral part of the courses or programs, particularly the undergraduate programs (Kapareliotis et al., 2019; Bawica, 2021). Internship is a short-term program within the higher education curriculum that enables students to receive actual job experience and training in the context of their area of study. This gives students the opportunity to obtain experience in the job market while simultaneously learning how to articulate the knowledge and skills they have learnt from the program or course. Through this direct exposure to the topic of study, students acquire confidence and improve their employability skills (Rowe

& Zegwaard, 2017 ; Griffin & Coelho, 2019 & Attri & Kushwaha, 2018; Bender, 2020; Mason et al., 2022).

Literature supports the concept that internship programs incorporated into HEI curricula improved graduate employability (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Griffin & Coelho, 2019 & Attri & Kushwaha, 2018; Cheng et al., 2021). The way in which internship programs are structured also affects its impact. This includes the duration and structure of the internship program. Internship programs are more effective when they are integrated into the curriculum (Silva et al., 2018). Through internship programs, the employability of graduates is increased, their career horizons are widened, and their job potential is strengthened, allowing them to take an active role in their career management (Reddan & Rauchle, 2017). Literature in the field also suggested that internship programs improve graduates' communication and teamwork skills, and have a favorable impact in the development of graduates' soft and hard skills (Ramakrishnan et al., 2018). Interns' critical thinking skills are enhanced by working in a real-life situation, the actual context. In addition to acquiring the essential information and skills for the job market, interns and graduates benefit greatly from the opportunity to gain field experience and to become employed. Literature indicated that internship programs that provide field experience increase critical thinking skills (Anjum, 2020; Voukelatou, 2019; Zayapragassarazan & Chacko, 2019).

Although the majority of the literature supports the development of graduates' critical thinking skill through internship programs, contrary to this, some literature also supports that internships have a negative impact on graduates' critical thinking skills and it is recommended that internship programs be revised to enhance the skill (Farouk et al., 2017). Moreover, due to variances in internship programs implemented at different universities, there is little difference in employability rates between students who have completed their internship programs and those who did not engage in the programs. It was also identified that this could be due to lack of relevance, the refusal of some employers to fully cooperate with internship programs, and the length of the programs (Adeosun et al., 2021; Anjum, 2020; Leutwyler et al., 2017). In support of this, it is also found that Quality of the internship services, support from the supervisor, task clarity, and perceived value significantly impact the effectiveness of the internship programs (Zhao et al., 2022). Thus, internship programs undertaken at various educational institutions produced varying results. However, the majority of research supports the assumption that internship programs help the development of critical thinking skills, hence positively improving employability and boosting the likelihood of being hired (Silva et al., 2018). Moreover, the literature suggests that university curricula should be revised to strengthen the alignment with internship programs and projects in the industry (Hadromi et al., 2020). Hence, the structure of the programs, the context, cooperation from the employers, workload of the students etc. have a strong impact on the outcome of the internship programs at different HEIs.

The inconclusive empirical evidence on the moderating effect of internship in developing the critical thinking skill for employability requires more extensive research. Apart from extending our knowledge on the area, the current study also contributes to our understanding of the impact

of internship programs in developing the critical thinking skill conducted in HEIs in Maldives. The conceptual framework to examine the moderating influence of internship programs is illustrated below in Fig.1.

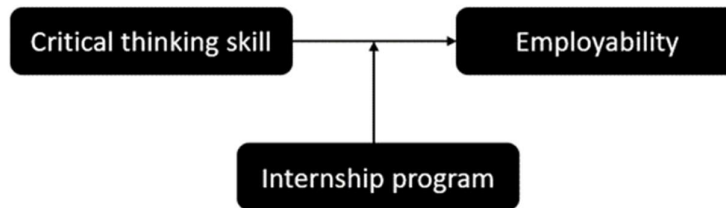


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

3. Methodology

This study utilized a cross-sectional survey design to collect quantitative data. Through a cross-sectional survey design, by collecting data at one point of time would be sufficient to achieve the objective of the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). The respondents were selected from employed undergraduates in the years 2018 and 2019, who are from HEIs of Maldives. The population of the research was 1662 undergraduates, based on the sample size table provided by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) as cited in Sekaran & Bougie (2016). With reference to this table the sample size for the study was 313 and used a simple random sampling method as a sampling approach. The respondents were approached through the database of the institutions, by email, through viber and WhatsApp.

A survey questionnaire was employed to acquire data for the study. To explore the moderation effect of internship programs between critical thinking skill and employability, a questionnaire with 16 items, originally developed by Career Benefits of CO-OP/ Internship Experience by Sawyer (2008) was adapted from Barnwell (2016). The independent variable, critical thinking skills, was measured using an adapted questionnaire from Kelley et al., 2019. To measure the dependent variable, employability, a 19 item questionnaire was adapted from Bezuidenhout (2011).

The current study involved a three stage research process. At first, to ensure validity, expert review will be conducted with 3-4 experts from the relevant field. Next, pilot study was conducted to identify the possible issues that may arise during the data collection process thus avoiding items that are bias and random error (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). To test for reliability of the questionnaire, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted using the results of the pilot study to finalize the items relevant to the study (Hair et.al 2016). Finally Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was carried out from the actual study to measure if the variables accurately measure the constructs of the study.

The final stage in the study is the moderation analysis from the collected data. This is to examine the moderating effect of internship programs on the relationship between critical thinking and employability. The analysis was conducted using path analysis in AMOS. Before the analysis, it was assumed that there is a significant relationship between critical thinking and employability, which is a requirement to conduct moderation analysis (Awang, 2015). Figure 2 shows the illustration of the three hypotheses required to determine the moderation effect of internship.

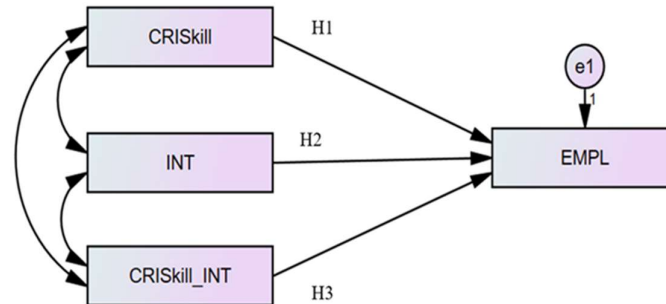


Figure 2: Internship as a Moderator in AMOS

According to figure 2, Critical thinking skill (CRISkill) is the independent variable X; Internship (INT) is the moderator M; while Employability (EMPL) is the dependent variable Y. In addition to this, XM is created from the product of X and M. The three hypotheses will be tested in the moderation analysis. Table 1 shows the indicators of moderation analysis using path analysis in AMOS. The regression equation is stated below.

Equation 1:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1X + \beta_2M + \beta_3XM + e_1 \quad (1)$$

Table 1 below, shows the summary of the analysis for the three hypotheses.

Hypothesis	Variables	Relationship	Testing
H1	CRISkill -> EMPL	X-Y	β_1
H2	INT -> EMPL	M-Y	β_2
H3	CRISkill_INT ->EMPL	XM-Y	β_3

Aim	Hypothesis	Moderation occurred		Moderation did not occur
To determine if H3 moderation has occurred		Significant		Non-significant
	H2	Non-significant		Significant
To determine the type of H1 moderation		Significant	Non-significant	Not applicable
		Partial moderation	Complete moderation	

Table 2: Indicators of moderation analysis results. Source: Adopted from Anuar et.al (2021).

4. Analysis of Results

After the pilot study some changes were brought to the items of the study. Based on the result of the reliability test and the Chronbach's Alpha value the items for the variables critical thinking and employability were sustained, as they ranged between 0.7 and 0.95 , however, the Chrobach's Alpha value for Internship was 0.97, indicating the need to modify the redundant items (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Thus, 5 items from this construct were eliminated and the Chronbach's Alpha value got reduced to 0.92. After the final data collection process was completed. The data was analysed using SPSS v.25 and AMOS 24. Descriptive analysis was conducted using SPSS and moderated regression analysis was conducted using AMOS for hypothesis testing.

4.1 Hypothesis testing

To explore the hypothesis that Internship programs moderate the effect between Critical Thinking Skill and Employability moderated regression analysis was carried out.

Prior to the analysis of the moderating variable, Internship was checked for all the required assumptions. These include the data to be independent, homoscedastic and normal distribution (Ponchio, 2018). Moreover, the effect of the independent variable towards the dependent variable was assumed and was found to be significant, which is an essential

assumption for moderation analysis (Awang, 2016). To conduct this analysis three hypotheses were identified in the model (Awang, 2015). This includes:

1. CRISkill – EMPL relationship (testing for β_1)- Indicated as Hypothesis 1.
2. INT – EMPL relationship (testing for β_2)- Indicated as Hypothesis 2.
3. CRISkillINT – EMPL relationship (testing for β_3)- Indicated as Hypothesis 3.

The result of the path analysis by AMOS is presented below in table 4

Table 3: The result of moderation analysis

		Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Label
EMP <---	CRISkill	.841	.291	2.886	.004	Significant
EMP <---	INT	.850	.277	3.070	.002	Significant
EMP <--	CRISkill_INT	-.127	.068	-1.852	.064	Not significant

The results indicate that H1 and H2 were significant, however, H3, which was the most important hypothesis, found not significant, which indicates that the moderation effect has not occurred (Anuar et al., 2021; Awang, 2015).

5. Discussion

The current study aimed at exploring the moderating effect on the relationship between critical thinking skills and employability of graduates from selected HEIs in Maldives. Although the internship program is an integral component in the programs at higher education level with support from literature, the result of the current study depicts an inconsistent result. Literature suggests that internship programs enhance the work related skills as well as soft skills required for the job market. Exposing the students to the study related contexts helps to develop their job related skills thus enhancing employability (Griffin & Coelho, 2019; Reddan & Rauchle, 2017; Silva et al., 2018; Anjum, 2020; Voukelatou, 2019; Zayapragassarazan & Chacko, 2019). This is further supported theoretically as well.

The Experiential Learning theory by Kolb (1984) is an important theory which suggests that exposure to the working environment enhances and develops the employability skills of candidates and learning becomes meaningful (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). However, the result of this study is inconsistent with the literature. According to the results, internship as a moderator between the relationship between critical thinking skill and employability is found not significant. This means that internship programs included in the educational programs did not

moderate the relationship between critical thinking skill and employability in the context. Although literature support was found anticipating the positive impact of internship, several literatures also support the fact that the outcome of internship varies due to several reasons. It was found from previous related studies that the outcome or impact of internship may vary from context to context depending on the duration of the programs, relevance, cooperation from the industry and how the program is structured or organized (Adeosun et al., 2021; Anjum, 2020; Leutwyler et al., 2017 & Zhao et al., 2022) . Moreover, graduates' unfamiliarity with critical thinking processes and its application in related contexts (Astuti et al., 2019). Thus, the moderating effect of internship programs may vary from context to context.

6. Conclusion

This paper aimed to fill the gap in previous studies by exploring the moderating influence of internship programs on the relationship between critical thinking skill and employability of graduates. It was assumed as well as tested that the relationship between critical thinking skill and employability was significant. Most of the literature was found anticipating the moderating influence of internship programs in developing the critical thinking skill as well as other 21st century skills required for employability. However, the current study in the concept of Maldives did not support the existing literature, this could be due to several reasons. Literature suggests that the outcome of internship programs could vary from context to context based on several factors. Thus, the current study depicts a similar result.

Hence, further research on the moderating influence of internship programs, in developing the critical thinking skill as well as other 21st century skills is recommended to be conducted involving more HEIs in Maldives. In addition to this, as skill development is vital in HE programs, the impact of internship programs on different disciplines must be conducted separately to measure its impact. This could also indicate the difference in different industries and their cooperation and collaboration level with the HEIs.

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