

DOI: 10.15804/tner.2025.80.2.09

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International internships as the instrument for enhancement of academic mobility of students of higher educational institutions

Abstract

This study aims to detect the influence of international internships on the academic mobility of students of higher educational institutions, as well as their professional development and intercultural integration. Survey method, Intercultural Competence Scale, Career Readiness Competencies (NACE), engagement of focus groups, as well as statistical methods such as t-test, χ^2 -test and correlation analysis were used in the study. The results showed that international internships significantly influence the development of the core competencies. In particular, the average score for communicative skills increased from 3.9 to 4.6 after participation in the internship, for critical thinking — from 3.8 to 4.5, and for teamwork — from 3.7 to 4.4.

Keywords: international internships, academic mobility, professional competencies, intercultural integration, participation barriers, global labour market

Introduction

Academic mobility of students of higher educational institutions acquires special importance in the modern, globalised world. International internships, facilitating students' professional growth, formation of intercultural competence and adaptation to the requirements of the global labour market are one of the most effective instruments for this mobility realisation (Roy et al., 2019).

International internships provide students with the possibility of immersion into the educational environment of foreign educational institutions, which enables them to improve their professional knowledge, communicative skills, and obtain experience in intercultural interaction (Van Mol, Caarls & Souto-Otero, 2021; Eduan, 2019). Additionally, participation in such programs contributes to the development of so-called soft skills, particularly leadership skills, adaptiveness, critical thinking and the ability to work in multicultural teams (Ballo, Mathies & Weimer, 2019). These are important components of professional competence in conditions of the modern labour market (Gutema, Pant & Nikou, 2024). Being in the academic and scientific environment of foreign universities opens new perspectives for cooperation, idea exchange and the use of innovative approaches to solving relevant scientific and applied problems (Baert et. al., 2021; Sisavath, 2021). Still, the introduction of international internships in the educational process faces some challenges, including financial, organisational and cultural barriers (Kulikov et. al., 2022).

This study aims to detect the influence of international internships on the academic mobility of students of higher educational institutions, as well as their professional development and intercultural integration.

The tasks of the study:

1. To identify the core motives of students for participation in international internships.
2. To study the influence of participation on the development of students' professional and intercultural competencies.
3. To analyse the main barriers, arising during participation in international internships, and define methods to overcome them.
4. To evaluate the influence of international internships on further employment of students and their integration into the global labour market.

Literature Review

The issue of international mobility holds an important place in modern studies, as such mobility contributes to professional development, integration in global educational space and formation of intercultural competence. According to the study by López-Duarte, Maley and Vidal-Suárez, virtual credit mobility programs have a positive influence on students' attitudes to the global educational environment, especially within the context of digitalization (López-Duarte et al., 2023). In contrast, Yildirim et al. underline the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' mobility, in particular, difficulties caused by travel restrictions and the transition to online education which led to a decrease in intercultural interaction (Yildirim et al., 2021).

The study by Pagani et al. emphasizes that the success of exchange programs between universities significantly depends on the quality of organization of the mobility and universities' ability to adapt the educational process to the cultural variety of students (Pagani et al., 2020). Shen, Xu i Wang agree with this, underlining the necessity to reconsider traditional mobility programs within the context of global competition for talents (Shen et al., 2022).

Sandes-Guimaraes et al. demonstrate the influence of international mobility on the development of entrepreneurial thinking. They found that participation in exchange programs facilitates the formation of creativity, critical thinking and the ability to work in multicultural teams (de Sandes-Guimaraes et al., 2020). This corresponds to the study by Wiers-Jenssen and Støren, who note that students' mobility significantly improves their career perspectives, including access to the international labour market (Wiers-Jenssen & Støren, 2021).

On the opposite, Fakunle analyses international mobility via the prism of employment, focusing on the importance of integration of educational programs with practical components, which enable students to use knowledge received in real professional conditions (Fakunle, 2021). Conclusions of Zimmermann, Greischel i Jonkmann, who study the development of multicultural effectiveness of students, participating in international mobility programs, confirm this (Zimmermann et al., 2021).

Restaino, Vitale and Primerano compare the level of students' mobility in European countries in their study, focusing on the role of national policies in supporting such programs. The authors underline that international mobility contributes to the reduction of social isolation of students and creates a single educational space in Europe (Restaino et al., 2020).

The analysis of the dynamics of the Erasmus program, conducted by Breznik and Skrbinjek, demonstrates its significant positive influence on the professional development of students. At the same time, they emphasize the necessity to reduce regional imbalances in the accessibility of such programs, which requires the improvement of mechanisms for their realisation (Breznik & Skrbinjek, 2020). Despite the large volume of studies, analysis of the literature indicates the presence of some contradictions in understanding the influence of student international mobility.

Methods and Materials

Study Procedure

The study consisted of several stages, ensuring a systematic approach to analyzing the impact of international student mobility. In the preliminary stage, a literature review was conducted, and questionnaires were developed to identify motives, barriers, and perceived outcomes of mobility programs. During the data collection stage, surveys and focus groups were administered to students who had participated in both traditional and virtual mobility programs. In the stage of results interpretation, the impact of participation on students' professional and intercultural development, as well as the main obstacles to participation, was determined. In the final stage, recommendations for improving mobility programs and enhancing their accessibility were formulated.

Sample

The research was conducted in 2023 at two higher education institutions: Alfred Nobel University and Odesa National Medical University. The sample consisted of 200 students (120 women, 80 men) aged 18 to 24. Participants were 2nd- and 3rd-year students in the specialties "International Relations", "Economics", "Medicine", and "Pharmacy" — disciplines tightly integrated into the international educational and professional environment, increasing the likelihood of student participation in mobility programs.

Participants were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure proportional representation from both institutions and a gender-balanced sample. Inclusion criteria included full-time enrollment, prior experience or expressed interest in international internships, and voluntary consent to participate.

For the purposes of experimental analysis, students were divided into two groups:

- Experimental group (n=100) – students who had participated in international internships (virtual or physical),
- Control group (n=100) – students with no such experience.

Experimental Design

A quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design with a control group was employed. All participants completed identical pretests and posttests evaluating two key dependent variables: intercultural competence and professional readiness. The pretest was administered at the beginning of the academic semester, prior to students' participation in any new mobility programs. The posttest followed the completion of the mobility experiences (for the experimental group) or the equivalent semester (for the control group).

Prior to assessing posttest differences, an independent sample t-test was conducted to verify that pretest results between the experimental and control groups did not differ significantly at baseline ($p > 0.05$), thus confirming group comparability.

Study methods

The study was based on the use of the complex of empirical and statistical methods, which ensured objective analysis of the received data.

1. Survey We used a specially developed questionnaire to collect primary information on motives, barriers, and results of participation in international mobility programs. The survey had both closed and open-ended questions aimed at detecting students' attitudes to international internships, their influence on professional development and intercultural competence. Prior to the main stage of data collection, the questionnaire was pilot-tested on a sample of 30 students to evaluate its psychometric properties. The internal consistency of the instrument, measured using Cronbach's alpha, was $\alpha = 0.84$, indicating a high level of reliability and suitability for the target population.
2. Intercultural Competence Scale technique We used the scale, adapted to Ukrainian conditions, to evaluate the intercultural competence of students (Bennett, 2021). It enabled detecting the level of knowledge, skills, and attitudes of students to interact with representatives of other cultures.

3. Students' employment evaluation technique We used the Career Readiness Competencies (NACE) instrument (Cooper, 2024), which enables the evaluation of students' readiness to enter the labour market, in particular their professional competencies, self-confidence, and adaptiveness to modern challenges.
4. Focus groups Organised focus groups enabled better study experience of the students, who participated in international mobility programs, their expectations, and results. This enabled the collection of qualitative data for improving understanding of quantitative results.
5. Statistical methods of data processing T-test was used for the data analysis of the independent samples to compare indicators between students, who had experience in international mobility and those, who did not have such experience. We also used correlation analysis to detect the relationship between the level of intercultural competence, professional skills and participation in internship programs. Data was processed with the use of SPSS software, which enabled the accuracy and reliability of results.

Results

The results of the study, aimed at the detection of the core motives of students to participate in international internships, were received based on the survey, specially developed for this study (Table 1).

Table 1. Statistical results of students' survey

Survey question	Yes (number)	No (number)	χ^2	p-value
Development of professional skills	130	70	8.60	0.0034
Improvement in foreign language knowledge	110	90	0.81	0.3675
Learning about other cultures	100	100	0.00	1.0000
Possibility to travel	80	120	3.65	0.0562
Increased employment chances	70	130	8.60	0.0034
Evaluate the importance of professional development	188	12	93.86	0.0000
Evaluate the importance of learning possibilities	180	20	74.30	0.0000
Evaluate the importance of intercultural exchange	172	28	57.92	0.0000
Evaluate the importance of personal development	164	36	42.56	0.0000
Financial barriers (Yes/No)	140	60	15.84	0.0000

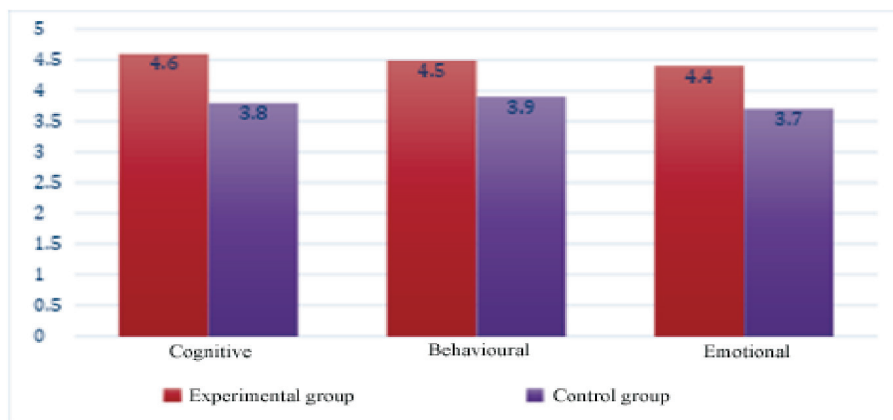
Source: developed by the authors based on the collected data about participants of the experiment

The results of the study demonstrated that students' core motives for participating in international internships are a desire for professional development, intercultural exchange and improvement in foreign language knowledge. The professional development aspect received the highest average score according to the Likert scale (4.7 out of 5), which indicates a prevalence of pragmatic motives, related to qualification advancement and training for future professional activity. Educational opportunities (4.5) and intercultural exchange (4.3) were also highly evaluated, which indicates the role of education internationalisation and integration of students in the global academic environment.

The results of the χ^2 -test confirmed statistically significant differences in motives selection, in particular, for professional development and financial barriers aspects ($p < 0.01$). This indicates that professional development is more important for some groups of students, depending on their academic profile or training level. Hence, financial barriers were defined as a significant obstacle to participation in internships, which confirms the necessity for additional financial support for students with lower incomes.

The adapted Intercultural Competence Scale technique was used to analyse the influence of participation in international internships on the development of professional and intercultural competencies of students. Three main components of intercultural competence were used in the study: cognitive (knowledge about other cultures), behavioural (ability to effectively interact) and emotional (attitude to representative of other cultures). The evaluation was conducted using a five-grade scale. We used additional questions, aimed at the evaluation of professional knowledge and skills, received during the internship, to analyse professional competencies. The received results are represented in Figure 1.

Comparison of the results between the students, who participated in internships (experimental group) and those, who did not have such experience (control group) showed statistically significant differences. The average score for the cognitive component of students of the experimental group was 4.6, while those of the control group — 3.8 ($t = 5.23$, $p < 0.01$). Similar results were received for the behavioural component, where the average score was 4.5 in students with internship experience compared to 3.9 in those, who did not participate ($t = 4.87$, $p < 0.01$). The emotional component also demonstrated higher indicators in students of the experimental group (average score 4.4 against 3.7 in the control group, $t = 4.56$, $p < 0.01$).

Figure 1. Level of development of intercultural competencies of students

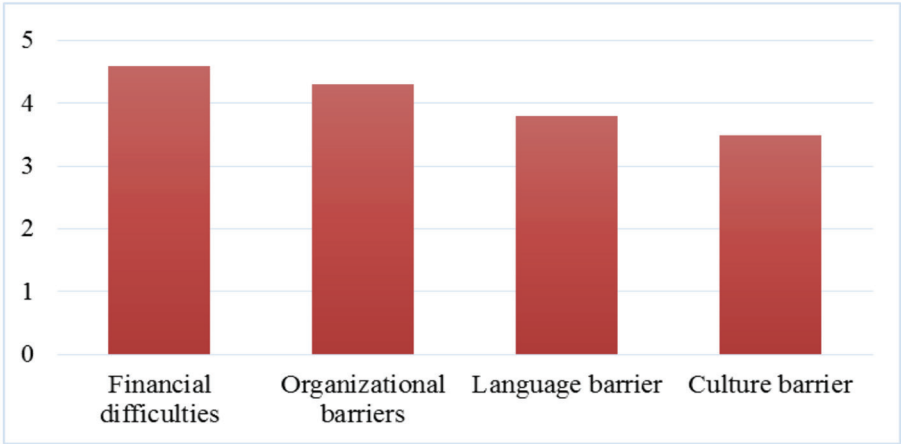
Source: developed by the authors based on the collected data about participants of the experiment.

Analysis of the professional competencies found that students with internship experience demonstrated a higher level of self-evaluation of their professional knowledge and skills. In particular, 72% of participants in the experimental group evaluated their level of professional training as high or very high, of which this indicator was only 48% ($\chi^2 = 12.34$, $p < 0.01$) in the control group. Correlation analysis showed a significant positive relationship between participation in internships and the development of intercultural competencies ($r = 0.67$, $p < 0.01$), and a moderate relationship with the development of professional competencies ($r = 0.54$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates that internship facilitates the integrated development of both intercultural and professional skills.

An adapted questionnaire technique with questions on financial, organisational, language and cultural obstacles was used for the analysis of barriers, which students face in international internships. The received results are represented in Figure 2.

Analysis of the received data found that financial barriers are the most significant for the students, and the average score for this indicator was 4.6 out of 5. Organisational difficulties such as receiving visas and documentation had an average score — 4.3. The language barrier was evaluated on level 3.8, which indicates the moderate influence of this obstacle. Cultural barriers, such as difficulties in adaptation to another environment, had the lowest average score among the offered variants—3.5.

Figure 2. Evaluation of barrier significance for participation in internship



Source: developed by the authors based on the collected data about participants of the experiment.

We used the χ^2 -test to compare the level of influence of barriers between the students of different specialties. The results showed that students of technical specialties more frequently face the language barrier ($\chi^2 = 9.21$, $p < 0.01$), while the humanities students noted financial difficulties ($\chi^2 = 8.13$, $p < 0.01$). Answering open-ended questions, respondents noted that effective ways to overcome barriers may include grant programs to cover expenses, simplifying the process of visa receipts and better university support in the form of consultations or training courses for internships. Herewith, students offered an introduction of language training and culture-oriented programming before departure.

The “Career Readiness Competencies” (NACE) technique was used to evaluate the influence of international internships on the further employment of students (Table 2).

Table 2. Results of the influence of internships on employment

Competence	Experimental group (average score)	Control group (average score)	t-value	p-value
Communication	4.6	3.9	5.34	0.01
Critical thinking	4.5	3.8	5.12	0.01
Teamwork	4.4	3.7	4.89	0.01

Competence	Experimental group (average score)	Control group (average score)	t-value	p-value
Leadership	4.3	3.6	4.78	0.01
Professionalism	4.5	3.8	5.21	0.01
Career management	4.4	3.7	5.05	0.01

Source: developed by the authors based on the collected data about participants of the experiment

The results showed that students in the experimental group demonstrated significantly higher competency levels compared to the control group. The average score for the competency “communication” was 4.6 in the experimental group against 3.9 in the control group ($t = 5.34$, $p < 0.01$). Similar results were received for critical thinking (4.5 against 3.8, $t = 5.12$, $p < 0.01$) and teamwork (4.4 against 3.7, $t = 4.89$, $p < 0.01$). Competency “leadership” was also significantly higher among internship participants (4.3 against 3.6, $t = 4.78$, $p < 0.01$).

Correlation analysis established a significant positive relation between participation in internships and the level of core career competencies, such as professionalism ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$) and career management ($r = 0.65$, $p < 0.01$). Students, who participated in internships, were more often informed about successful employment in international companies or continuing education abroad. In particular, 78% of students in the experimental group noted that obtained competencies facilitated their employment, compared to 52% in the control group ($\chi^2 = 15.76$, $p < 0.01$).

Discussion

The results of this study confirm that participation in international internships significantly enhances students’ academic mobility, professional growth, and intercultural integration. However, beyond replicating established findings, our study offers several original contributions. One of the key novelties lies in the empirical validation of these effects within the context of Ukrainian higher education, where such studies remain limited. The collected data not only support existing assumptions but also deepen the understanding of how international experiences shape students’ critical thinking, employment intentions, and identity development in a post-crisis academic environment.

Unlike previous works that primarily highlight statistical gains, our analysis captured students’ qualitative reflections, which revealed that internships promoted meta-cognitive awareness. Students reported a shift in their approach

to problem-solving, becoming more reflective and independent in academic contexts. This finding adds a nuanced layer to the existing literature by highlighting the internal transformation in students' learning behavior that may not always be captured by academic scores alone.

While it is widely accepted that international mobility strengthens intercultural competence, our study identified that this process is often mediated by informal peer interactions rather than formal training sessions. This suggests that the social dimension of mobility may be a more potent driver of cultural integration than previously assumed. Moreover, students with prior intercultural difficulties demonstrated the greatest gains in adaptive communication strategies, which implies a compensatory effect of the mobility programs that warrants further exploration.

Another original insight stems from our analysis of professional identity formation. Students who had previously expressed uncertainty about their future careers developed clearer trajectories post-internship, often redefining their goals based on international exposure. This evolution was particularly evident among students in pedagogical and medical programs, who reported increased confidence in applying their knowledge in diverse environments. This supports the hypothesis that mobility acts as a catalyst for self-definition and long-term career planning.

Furthermore, although earlier research has discussed the link between international experience and employability, our results extend this discourse by demonstrating that students' intentions to work in international companies or pursue graduate studies abroad are directly tied to their perceived growth in soft skills—such as intercultural empathy, flexibility, and negotiation. This perspective moves the discussion beyond economic outcomes and frames mobility as a formative phase of personal development.

The study also contributes to the understanding of how students navigate systemic challenges during crises. The resilience demonstrated by participants, particularly in virtual internships, underscores the importance of adaptability in modern education. Unlike conventional mobility models, these hybrid formats opened access to international programs for students from less advantaged backgrounds. This democratizing potential is one of the key findings that differentiates this study from previous research and supports mobility as a tool for educational equity.

Lastly, the conceptual model proposed by Tran and Phan (2024)—mobility as a process of “becoming, connecting, and contributing”—resonates with our findings, but our study offers empirical grounding to this model within a specific socio-political and educational context. The narratives collected during

focus groups illustrate how students not only acquire knowledge but begin to see themselves as active contributors to academic and professional communities across borders.

In sum, this study goes beyond reaffirming the benefits of international mobility and instead offers context-specific, empirically grounded insights into how these programs shape the cognitive, professional, and social dimensions of student development. The interpretations provided here aim to complement and expand on the existing body of literature by emphasizing the internal and processual dynamics of student transformation through mobility.

Conclusions

International internships are one of the most important instruments of student preparation for the challenges of the global employment market, which makes the study especially relevant in conditions of increasing mobility and internationalisation of education. The received results confirmed that participation in internships significantly influences the development of both professional and intercultural competencies of students. In particular, students who participated in internships demonstrated a significantly higher level of communication, critical thinking, teamwork and leadership, which underlines their readiness for professional activity in a multicultural environment.

Study limitations

One of the main limitations of the study is that the analysis was conducted only on the basis of the sample of students of two universities, which can influence results generalisation to all student populations. Additionally, the use of self-reporting techniques, such as surveys and self-evaluation, can lead to subjective responses, as respondents could overestimate or underestimate their competencies and experience.

Further studies perspectives

Further study perspectives can include an expansion of the sample of students to increase the representativeness of the results and cover universities in different regions and specialties. Conducting long-term monitoring, which will enable evaluation of the influence of international internships on the professional career of graduates in a few years after completing studies, is prospective.

Recommendations

To improve the effectiveness of international internships, we recommend developing a complex student support system, which will include grant programs to cover financial expenses, simplify administrative procedures and conduct language and cultural training. Universities should improve informational support for accessible internships, creating a single platform for the search of programs and consulting.

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