

Adapting Internship Programs to Global Disruptions: Lived Experiences of Student-Trainees in a Higher Education Institution in Samar, Philippines

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Abstract: Global disruptions have significantly impacted traditional internship programs, prompting higher education institutions to adopt modular and online approaches to sustain learning. This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of student-trainees in on-the-job training programs at a higher education institution in Samar during a period of restricted face-to-face interactions. Using a phenomenological design, in-depth interviews revealed six key themes: lack of experiential learning, teaching-learning gaps, resource constraints, abrupt transitions, challenges with independent learning, and time management difficulties. The participants' narratives highlighted the absence of hands-on experiences and limited opportunities to bridge theory and practice, which hindered their preparedness for professional work. Resource challenges, including unreliable internet access and financial constraints, further compounded their struggles, while adapting to independent learning and managing personal distractions proved equally challenging. Despite these obstacles, the trainees demonstrated resilience and adaptability, emphasizing the need for innovative approaches to internship programs. This study recommends integrating virtual simulations, training faculty in remote teaching strategies, and implementing robust support systems to address students' diverse needs. By adopting flexible and crisis-resilient frameworks, higher education institutions can enhance students' learning outcomes and better prepare them for the demands of professional environments during disruptions. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on transforming educational practices to ensure continuity and effectiveness amidst global challenges.

1. Introduction

Internship programs are an essential part of the academic requirements for completing a bachelor's degree in colleges and universities (Kurunarathe &

Perera, 2019). They serve as training grounds for students to apply the knowledge and skills they have learned in the classroom. An internship bridges the gap between theory and practice. Typically

lasting three months to a year, it allows students to combine their academic learning with real-world work experience (Bayerlein, 2020).

On-the-Job Training allows graduating students to apply classroom knowledge in real-world workplace settings (Carlos, 2021). This hands-on experience helps them develop essential work values and attitudes required in professional environments (Smith, 2018). It also prepares them to become efficient and effective leaders capable of thriving in cross-cultural and multidisciplinary endeavors (Neverlien, 2022). By bridging the gap between theory and practice, such training fosters both personal and professional growth.

Furthermore, internships in public administration offer significant educational and practical benefits (Silva et al., 2018). They provide students with firsthand experience and deeper insights into the operations of government and public sector organizations. For exceptional students, internships can be particularly transformative. Without such exposure, many might not have considered pursuing a career in the public sector due to a lack of understanding of its inner workings (Malinson & Burns, 2019).

Crises, such as pandemics, hinder face-to-face interactions, including traditional classroom learning and on-the-job training programs. These situations have significantly transformed educational delivery methods, prompting institutions to adopt various learning modalities, including blended learning, to ensure continuity amid restrictions on face-to-face classes. Consequently, students have been able to select modalities that best suit their

circumstances (Koh & Daniel, 2022). Internship programs, particularly in state colleges and universities, have also adapted by introducing new modalities to facilitate the practical application of theoretical knowledge (Bilsland et al., 2020).

At a higher education institution in Samar, the use of diverse modalities in internship programs has posed challenges for students, potentially compromising the attainment of key competencies. This may affect hands-on experiences crucial for transitioning from theoretical learning to practical application. Internship programs aim to prepare students through supervised, structured work that enhances personal skills, fosters teamwork, and builds professional relationships. However, without face-to-face interactions, students must adapt to alternative modalities, which can limit experiential learning and affect overall workplace readiness (Hora et al., 2023).

This study qualitatively examines the experiences of students and on-the-job trainees during crises, providing feedback on the relevance and effectiveness of modular internship programs. The findings can inform future research on effective internship approaches when face-to-face activities are restricted (Cullinan et al., 2021).

The study highlights the struggles and challenges faced by student-trainees as alternative modalities replaced traditional hands-on learning. It also explores how students adapted to these new modalities and what they learned in the absence of face-to-face interactions. These insights may guide the evaluation and

improvement of current learning modalities (McCormick & Marron, 2024).

Research shows that learning modules can enhance skills, with a strong link between module completion and improved performance. Students reported greater satisfaction and higher final exam scores using modules (Koh & Daniel, 2022). However, while printed modules facilitate skill acquisition, they may not support long-term retention as effectively as other modalities (McCormick & Marron, 2024).

This study investigates how student-trainees adapted to and learned from various modalities during crises, focusing on their experiences in the absence of face-to-face interactions.

2. Objectives

The study aimed to understand the challenges encountered by on-the-job trainees during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the summer semester of the 2019-2020 academic year at a Higher Education Institution in Samar.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative approach, specifically a phenomenological research design, to explore the lived experiences of on-the-job trainees during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This design was chosen to capture the essence of the challenges faced by the trainees and to provide a comprehensive understanding of their shared experiences in adapting to modular and online internship programs (Creswell, 2013).

Through this approach, the researcher identified six key themes from the in-depth interviews: No Experiential Learning, Teaching-Learning Gap, Lack of Resources, Sudden Transition, Incapable of Independent Learning, and Time Management Difficulties. These themes revealed the significant impacts of remote learning modalities on the trainees' preparedness for real-world work environments, their ability to acquire practical skills, and their overall learning outcomes.

The absence of hands-on training, combined with insufficient instructional support, resource constraints, and the abrupt transition to new learning modalities, highlighted the complexities of conducting internship programs during a pandemic. The phenomenological approach provided valuable insights into these interconnected challenges, offering a deeper understanding of the trainees' experiences and informing recommendations for improving future internship programs.

3.2. Research Instrument

The primary research instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide, specifically designed to explore participants' experiences of their internships, particularly those who had undergone their internship during the COVID-19 pandemic. This tool was essential for collecting in-depth qualitative data, offering the flexibility to probe for additional insights as needed. The interview guide was carefully developed to align with the study's objectives and capture key aspects of the participants' experiences, including the challenges they encountered, their coping strategies, the learning outcomes they achieved, and their suggestions for improving internship programs.

The interview questions were intentionally open-ended to encourage participants to provide detailed, reflective responses and share their firsthand experiences of navigating internship challenges during a global crisis. The initial draft of the interview guide underwent a validation process, starting with a review by two experts: one specializing in qualitative research methods and the other with extensive experience in managing internship programs in higher education. Both experts provided comprehensive feedback on the structure, clarity, and relevance of the questions. The researcher incorporated their suggestions, refining the guide to ensure it was both aligned with the study's objectives and appropriate for eliciting meaningful and relevant data from the participants.

Table 1

Interview protocol

Questions
How was your internship experience in general?
What part of the internship training do you consider the most challenging? Why?
How did you cope with those challenges?
In what way did internship help your learning about your chosen course in college in terms of: (a) module content/lessons and tasks, (b) OJT Supervisor/Professor/Adviser and (c) others.
What are your suggestions on how to improve the internship experience during this pandemic?

3.3 Research Sample

The study employed purposive sampling, a method that involves selecting

participants based on specific criteria they must meet at the time of selection (Diaz, 2015). Participants in this study were chosen based on the following criteria: (1) they were bona fide students of a higher education institution in Samar, and (2) they were officially enrolled in the OJT or internship program during the summer semester, coinciding with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This period was considered a crisis for many Filipinos, particularly in the geographic setting of Samar.

3.4 Data Gathering Procedure

Participants who met the study's inclusion criteria were invited to participate in a one-on-one, semi-structured, in-depth interview with the researcher via the Messenger application. A total of 10 students agreed to participate, and consent forms tailored to the study were distributed to them. Before the interviews, participants were briefed on the study's objectives, the scope of their participation, and the rationale for their selection.

Participants were informed that the interviews would be audio-recorded to ensure accurate data analysis. They were assured that the recordings would be used solely for research purposes and were securely deleted after transcription to maintain confidentiality. As a gesture of appreciation, participants received a monetary incentive transferred via the GCash platform.

3.5 Data Analysis

The researcher utilized Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process for thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report qualitative data. The six steps are as follows: (1) Familiarization with the data, where the researcher immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts to gain a thorough

understanding; (2) Generating initial codes, which involved systematically coding significant features of the data across the entire dataset; (3) Searching for themes, where the researcher organized the codes into potential themes; (4) Reviewing themes, which involved refining the themes by ensuring they accurately represented the data and were distinct from one another; (5) Defining and naming themes, where the researcher provided clear definitions and names for each theme to capture their essence; and (6) Producing the report, which involved compiling the findings into a coherent narrative supported by data excerpts.

4. Results and Discussion

The researcher extracted several themes from the in-depth interview data gathered during the study. Through a detailed analysis of the data, six (6) key themes emerged: no experiential learning, teaching-learning gap, lack of resources, sudden transition, incapability of independent learning, and time management difficulties. These themes reflect the various challenges and experiences faced by the participants during their internships, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 2

Themes, Key Concepts from Student-Trainees Response and Supporting Quotes

Themes	Key Concepts and Supporting Statements
No Experiential Learning	Key Concepts No hands-on experience because it was done through modular and online approaches. Thus, they feel like it was an insufficient learning because the students feel like they are not prepared to the actual working set up Supporting Quotes “Actually, I don’t consider it as internship because I haven’t learned anything. It was only modular, and no hands-on tasks given. I can conclude that my learning is not enough if I were to ask what my experience was, then I have nothing to say. Sad to say I don’t have any experiential learning.” (Interviewee 1, Line 11 – 16). “I don’t have training in my internship. Modular is very challenging because I don’t have a foretaste of what we will be doing in our actual work in the future. I’m currently applying for a job and I’m struggling to answer them if what have I accomplished in our internship. I could not say anything regarding my experience in our internship because it was not an actual working set up.” (Interviewee 1, Line 20 – 25) “What I can say is it would be much better if were given the chance for an actual work because I have not learned anything with our modular internship. My course that I took up needs to have a hands-on actual work.” (Interviewee 1, Line 37 – 38) “Modular internship has not helped me a lot.” (Interviewee 1, Line 40)
Teaching-learning Gap	Key Concepts Students, particularly the slow learners were not able to understand because the instructor failed to discuss further the module content and failed to use instructional strategy. Supporting Quotes “Like in my case, I am a slow-learner, and I needed a clear discussion of the lessons so that I can understand all of them. My suggestion is that even if we are in a pandemic period, the teacher should do its best to discuss the lessons thoroughly because not all students can learn fast.” (Participant 1, Line 38-40, 45-47).

	"During this pandemic, I humbly suggest that the instructors might want to give tasks and activities one at a time. Everyone right now faces different struggles, so I just think it would be great if we help each other." (Interviewee 2, Line 92-94)
Lack of Resources	Key Concepts Students struggle with finances, gadget and internet connectivity. Supporting Quotes "During online classes, they should consider that not everyone can afford to buy a load and cellphone and not everyone has a good internet signal." (Participant 1, Line 48-50) "During webinars, I would always feel being left out in the session because my internet connection is not that stable." (Interviewee 4, Line 154-155) "The most challenging part is having a slow internet." (Interviewee 5, Line 192) "During meeting I always look for a place that has a good internet." (Interviewee 5, Line 196) "Instructors must also understand every situation that their students might encounter along the way for example students might not meet the said deadline." (Interviewee 5, Line 222-223) "I live in a remote area of municipality of motiong, and I needed to go up a mountain just to get internet signal." (Interviewee 6, Line 246-247)
Sudden Transition	Key Concepts The students were unprepared by the sudden change of the learning modality. Supporting Quotes "The most challenging part about the internship we had was the fact that everything was online including the instructions. Also, I was somehow unsure to what I was doing since I am not the type of a student who learns just by reading. I need further explanations and clarifications." Interviewee 2, Line 67-70 "It was a challenging experience for me. Because of the unprecedented lockdowns, face-to-face interaction was restricted which impacted the most on my internship. Everything was installed through online platforms both the delivery and acquisition of learning materials. I access my LPs though online, I supplement the discussions given by our instruction through online, I send my activity sheets using online. Given these circumstances, it was really a challenge for me on how to keep up with this sudden transition on the mode of learning that most of us are still using considering the poor internet penetration, the financial burden of providing data services to access internet, the asynchronous response of our queries to our teachers/instructors due to their work demands as well which hinders them to respond from time-to-time." (Interviewee 7, Line 286-296) "We tried to adapt with the changes. It was not only a struggle on our part as students but also on the part of our professor. So, it was a give-and-take between the students and the professor. We were the first batch affected by the sudden change, but we learned to adapt later on." (Interviewee 9, Line 426-428)
Incapable of Independent Learning	Key Concepts The students were struggling in understanding the lessons and accomplishing the tasks on their own. Supporting Quotes "I am not the type of a student who learns just by reading. I need further explanations and clarifications." (Interviewee 2, Line 68-70)

	"Just like me who's a slow-learner I need someone who teaches clearly so that I can comprehend more." (Interviewee 1, Line 38-40) "I had a hard time focusing on my lessons because there were many distraction, phones, movies and online games. So instead of studying I was easily distracted because there were no teachers in front of us, I lost my focus, many things at home caused my motivations and determinations to drop." (Interviewee 3, Line 108-111) "If we can't do it face to face then at least, have a class online using different platforms twice a week. because modular classes seemed to be so weak and is very prone to procrastination, most of students doesn't even read what is printed. I know it's not the problem of the university, it's within the determination of the students to learn but at least let the students feel that they are obliged to study." Interviewee 3, Line 130-134 "I can learn somehow, but I find it so challenging because I have to interpret it on my own." (Interviewee 6, Line 247-248) "Because we are in a pandemic so it's hard to learn a thing that we don't know." (Interviewee 9, Line 420-421) "For me the most challenging part of my internship is when I got the chance to do things on my own without supervision." (Interviewee 10, Line 463-464)
Time Management Difficulties	Key concepts The students were not able to focus on their studies because of a lot of factors. Supporting Quotes "I had a hard time focusing on my lessons because there were many distraction, phones, movies and online games. So instead of studying I was easily distracted because there were no teachers in front of us, I lost my focus, many things at home caused my motivations and determinations to drop." (Interviewee 3, Line 108-111)

4.1 No Experiential Learning

One of the themes identified from the data was the lack of experiential learning among on-the-job trainees. Participants expressed feelings of being unprepared for the actual working environment due to the absence of hands-on experiences during their internships. This lack of practical exposure negatively impacted their perception of the internship program and their readiness for future professional roles.

Interviewee 1 highlighted this concern, stating:

"Actually, I don't consider it as internship because I haven't learned anything. It was only modular, and no hands-on tasks

given. I can conclude that my learning is not enough if I were to ask what my experience was, then I have nothing to say. Sad to say I don't have any experiential learning." (Interviewee 1)

Similarly, Interviewee 4 shared:

"Honestly, I'm not satisfied at all because our learning was not properly used in a real working set up because we had just attended a free webinar. We didn't have skills developed." (Interviewee 4)

This finding aligns with the observations of Kolb (1984), who emphasized the significance of experiential learning in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. The lack of hands-on

tasks and real-world exposure undermines the primary purpose of internships, which is to prepare students for the demands of the professional world. In similar contexts, studies by Nguyen, Keun, and Madjar (2021) and Tan, Lee, and Sim (2020) also underscored the importance of experiential learning in fostering skill development and enhancing workplace readiness.

The reliance on modular activities and webinars during the pandemic may have contributed to this gap in experiential learning. While these approaches provided continuity in learning, they failed to replicate the practical scenarios that students would encounter in real-life work environments. According to Jackson (2018), the absence of such experiences can lead to a skills mismatch, leaving graduates feeling ill-equipped for the workforce.

This lack of experiential learning highlights the need for institutions and organizations to innovate and adapt internship programs to ensure that students gain meaningful, practical exposure, even in challenging circumstances such as a global pandemic.

4.2 Teaching-Learning Gap

Another theme identified from the data was the teaching-learning gap experienced by student-trainees. Participants reported difficulties in understanding the module content due to insufficient discussion by their professors and the lack of effective instructional strategies. These challenges were exacerbated by the inability to handle multiple tasks simultaneously, which contributed to their struggle in coping with the academic requirements.

Interviewee 1 expressed:

“Like in my case, I am a slow-learner and I needed a clear

discussion of the lessons so that I can understand all of them. My suggestion is that even if we are in a pandemic period, the teacher should do its best to discuss the lessons thoroughly because not all students can learn fast.” (Interviewee 1).

Similarly, Interviewee 2 stated:

“During this pandemic, I humbly suggest that the instructors might want to give tasks and activities one at a time. Everyone right now faces different struggles, so I just think it would be great if we help each other.” (Interviewee 2)

4.3 Lack of Resources

Student-trainees struggle with finances because they could not afford to buy cellphone loads and acquire gadgets for online learning and generally their internet connectivity is poor. The participant responded with the following statements:

“During online classes, they should consider that not everyone can afford to buy a load and cellphone and not everyone has a good internet signal.” (Interviewee 1)

“During webinars, I would always feel being left out in the session because my internet connection is not that stable.” (Interviewee 4)

These findings align with the study by Dziuban et al. (2020), which highlights the challenges of remote learning during the pandemic, particularly the difficulty in ensuring clarity and engagement in online instructional delivery. Moreover, the need for manageable task allocation aligns with research by Hodges et al. (2020), which emphasizes the importance of pacing and

flexibility in remote teaching to address the diverse needs of students.

The participants' responses underscore the need for professors to adopt effective teaching strategies, such as breaking down complex content into smaller, more digestible parts and incorporating interactive elements to enhance understanding. Additionally, providing clear instructions and prioritizing task sequencing can help reduce the cognitive load on students, as suggested by the cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1988).

These challenges highlight the necessity for higher education institutions to provide faculty development programs focused on remote teaching strategies and student-centered approaches, particularly during crisis situations like the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.4 Sudden Transition

The sudden shift from face-to-face learning to a blended learning modality posed significant challenges for students. Participants reported being unprepared for the abrupt transition, which required them to adapt quickly to new learning methods and technologies. This transition was further complicated by poor internet access, financial constraints, and delays in communication with instructors.

Interviewee 7 shared their struggles:

"It was a challenging experience for me. Because of the unprecedented lockdowns, face-to-face interaction was restricted which impacted the most on my internship. Everything was installed through online platforms both the delivery and acquisition of learning materials. (I access my LPs through online, I supplement

the discussions given by our instruction through online, I send my activity sheets using online). Given these circumstances, it was really a challenge for me on how to keep up with this sudden transition on the mode of learning that most of us are still using considering the poor internet penetration, the financial burden of providing data services to access internet, the asynchronous response of our queries to our teachers/instructors due to their work demands as well which hinders them to respond from time-to-time." (Interviewee 7)

Similarly, Interviewee 9 highlighted the mutual effort required during this period:

"We tried to adapt with the changes. It was not only a struggle on our part as students but also on the part of our professor. So, it was a give-and-take between the students and the professor. We were the first batch affected by the sudden change, but we learned to adapt later on." (Interviewee 9)

This finding is consistent with the observations of Hodges et al. (2020), who highlighted the challenges faced by both students and instructors during the emergency transition to remote learning. The lack of preparation and resources for both parties led to increased stress and difficulty in maintaining learning outcomes. Similarly, studies by Bao (2020) and Dhawan (2020) emphasize the significant barriers posed by inadequate internet access, financial challenges, and the lack of familiarity with online platforms.

The participants' responses reveal the importance of providing adequate support and training for both students and faculty to manage the demands of blended

learning effectively. Institutions should prioritize infrastructure improvements, such as stable internet access and affordable data services, and offer ongoing faculty development programs to ensure effective teaching strategies are employed. Additionally, fostering an adaptive learning environment can help ease the transition and build resilience among students and instructors.

4.5 Incapable of Independent Learning

Another theme that emerged from the data was the struggle of student-trainees to engage in independent learning. Many participants expressed difficulty in understanding lessons and completing tasks without additional guidance or supervision. The lack of direct interaction with instructors posed a significant challenge for those who required more support to fully grasp the concepts and instructions provided.

Interviewee 2 shared:

“I am not the type of a student who learns just by reading. I need further explanations and clarifications.”

(Interviewee 2)

Interviewee 2 shared:

“I can learn somehow, but I find it so challenging because I have to interpret it on my own.”

(Interviewee 6)

Interviewee 10 added:

“For me, the most challenging part of my internship is when I got the chance to do things on my own without supervision.” (Interviewee 10)

These responses are consistent with the findings of Zimmerman (2002), who

emphasized the importance of self-regulated learning in achieving academic success. Without adequate guidance and support, students who lack strong self-regulation skills may find it difficult to engage with course content effectively. Similarly, Garrison (1997) highlighted that independent learning requires not only self-motivation but also the ability to self-monitor and seek assistance when needed, which may not always be possible in remote or blended learning setups.

The challenges faced by student-trainees in adapting to independent learning underscore the need for instructors to implement strategies that support students' autonomy while providing sufficient scaffolding. These strategies could include regular check-ins, providing clear and detailed instructions, and utilizing asynchronous resources like video tutorials to offer additional explanations. By fostering a balance between independence and support, educators can help students gradually develop the skills necessary for effective self-directed learning.

4.6 Time Management Difficulties

Another significant challenge faced by student-trainees was the difficulty in maintaining focus on their studies due to various distractions and an overwhelming number of tasks assigned by their instructors. The lack of a structured, face-to-face learning environment further contributed to their struggles, as it was harder to stay motivated and disciplined at home.

Interviewee 3 highlighted the distractions at home and their impact on focus and motivation:

“I had a hard time focusing on my lessons because there were many distraction, phones, movies and online games. So instead of studying I was easily

distracted because there were no teachers in front of us, I lost my focus, many things at home caused my motivations and determinations to drop.” (Interviewee 3).

Additionally, the burden of managing multiple tasks simultaneously made it harder for students to cope with the demands of their coursework. Interviewee 2 suggested that instructors reconsider task allocation:

“During this pandemic, I humbly suggest that the instructors might want to give tasks and activities one at a time. Everyone right now faces different struggles, so I just think it would be great if we help each other.” (Interviewee 2).

These findings align with the studies of Wang and Degol (2017), who emphasized that environmental distractions significantly affect students’ ability to concentrate and sustain motivation. The lack of external accountability, such as the physical presence of teachers, often leads to procrastination and reduced academic performance. Similarly, Kahu and Nelson (2018) underscored the importance of structured learning environments and manageable workloads in promoting student engagement and motivation.

To address these challenges, it is crucial for educators to create a more supportive learning environment. This could include strategies such as setting clear expectations, designing tasks that promote focus and engagement, and providing individualized support to help students manage their responsibilities effectively. Additionally, fostering open communication between instructors and students can help identify and alleviate barriers to academic success.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

The research identified significant obstacles, including the lack of hands-on experiences, gaps in teaching and learning, limited access to necessary resources, abrupt transitions to remote learning setups, struggles with independent learning, and difficulties in time management. These challenges underscore the profound impact of crises on the delivery of internship programs, which are critical in preparing trainees for professional roles. The findings highlight the urgent need for educational institutions to adapt and design internship programs that remain effective and meaningful, even during disruptions caused by crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

To address these challenges, Higher Education Institutions should innovate and strengthen internship programs to ensure continuity and relevance during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Integrating virtual simulations and digital tools can help provide practical learning opportunities remotely, mitigating the limitations of traditional hands-on training. Institutions should also implement robust support systems, including mentorship programs and training on self-directed learning and time management, to equip trainees with the skills necessary for remote and independent work. By creating flexible, crisis-resilient internship frameworks, institutions can ensure that trainees are well-prepared for professional demands, regardless of external challenges.

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