

## Perception of the Internship Programme Among Undergraduate Candidates of the Bachelor of Science Honours Degree in Agribusiness Management in University of Ruhuna, Sri Lanka

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### Abstract

Internships (IS) are important for students to get meaningful practical experience in their related field of study before entering the industrial world. Despite the completion of the internship, the employment rate among graduates remains low, raising the question of whether students are obtaining the required competencies through internships that they require to perform a job. Therefore, this study was conducted to assess the students' perceptions of internship programmes while identifying expected and acquired skills, benefits, and challenges and providing suggestions. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey was employed

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for this study. The sample consisted of 53 students from the recent two batches who have completed their internship. Data were collected through a pre-tested, electronically distributed questionnaire and analyzed descriptively. Results revealed that 58.8 % of the students have completed their internships in the private sector, as expected by the policy makers of the faculty. The major skills gained included real-life working experience, managerial skills, communication skills, time management skills, and adaptability skills, while gaining practical skills through the application of academic knowledge, followed by industry exposure and understanding, personality development and skill enhancement, networking, and public relations opportunities were the major benefits from IS. However, a low level of employment still exists due to the prevailing external factors. This can be addressed by supporting entrepreneurial initiatives to encourage students to become job creators rather than job seekers. The major challenges faced included training-related, personal, working environment-related, and university-related challenges. It is suggested to increase IS to at least 3 months, improve students' soft skills, incorporate entrepreneurship, and enhance industry-university collaborations to improve industrial training experience.

**Keywords:** *Agribusiness, internship, perception undergraduates*

## **Introduction**

Sri Lankan universities stand as one of the major institutes for the production and dissemination of knowledge, while contributing to the intellectual and professional growth of their students. They have a primary goal of producing graduates with the skills and knowledge required to address the demand for the world of work in society. The Faculty of Agriculture, University of Ruhuna, is the pioneer in offering an agribusiness degree programme in Sri Lanka since 2012, producing approximately 50 graduates per year. This degree program aims to equip students with the theoretical knowledge, skills, attitudes, entrepreneurship, business communication skills, and essential management techniques to

become competent entrepreneurs and/or researchers. The degree incorporates industrial training as a vital component of their curriculum to provide students with industrial exposure. Industrial training is an organized initiative that provides supervised practical experience under the designs time schedule (Srinivasan, 2014). The industrial training place provides a place to apply the theoretical knowledge gained through the study; it assists students in preparing themselves for the world of work and getting the required technical and employability skills (Yusoff et al., 2010). The internship serves as a pathway for newcomers to enter the industry (Baltescu, 2016). According to Knouse et al. (1999), graduates who have completed internships tend to secure employment more than others.

In the BSc in Agribusiness degree programme, students are required to complete a 6-week internship in the final year to complete their degree programme and gain industry exposure. They are provided with the opportunity to select a particular private or public institute for training or an industrial placement office that provides potential placement for them. They need to maintain a daily activity book under the supervision of a supervisor. The university conducts the final evaluation after the completion of the training, and students have to present their experience there. Despite the completion of internship, the employment rate of graduates has become a problem presently. Sri Lankan unemployment rate in 2024 was 4.5%, while the youth unemployment rate was 20.6% (Department of Census and Statistics, 2024). A tracer study conducted by the University Grants Commission (UGC) (2022) found that about 33.3% of them are currently unemployed. According to Pinikahana (2011), although universities and the government have developed several strategies, graduate unemployment has become one of the major problems in Sri Lankan public policy. Recent studies revealed that graduate unemployment has led to engaging in jobs with low salaries and irrelevance (Wickramarachchi, 2008; Ariyawansa, 2008). Hence, graduates are engaging in pickets and seeking government jobs while there is a shortage of job availability in the

market. Moreover, age, followed by lack of industrial experience and personal contacts, is the main issue that graduates have to face when they are looking for a relevant job (Fernando et al., 2022). Mismatch between graduates' quality and employer requirements (Nawaratne, 2012; Nanayakkra, 1998) and mismatch between the graduates' skills and the industry requirements have also led to the unemployability of graduates (Ariyawansa, 2008). Therefore, equipping students with the required skills, competence, and knowledge is essential to thrive in their careers. This underscores the necessity of facilitating better linkage between this degree and the industry with a focus on determining whether students are obtaining the required competencies through industrial training that they require to perform a job. Nevertheless, there has been a lack of exploration of undergraduate's perceptions of internship experience. Consequently, this study aimed to assess the students' perception of internship experience, while the specific objectives were:

- 1.To identify the expected and actual skills acquired and benefits gained from the internship
- 2.To examine the challenges faced by students during the internship period
- 3.To provide appropriate suggestions to improve the programme

## **Review of Literature**

Gault et al. (2000) defines internship as part-time field experiences that encompass a wide variety of academic disciplines and organizational settings. Internships prepare students for their future careers by being a practical learning and professional development place (Bennett et al., 2008; Davies & Sandiford, 2014; White, 2013). Internships also provide students with a platform to practice the way theoretical knowledge works in a real-world context. In the present context, employers do not solely consider the academic knowledge of the candidates when they hire employees but they also focus on skills and abilities to perform in

the industry. Therefore, internships increase the marketability of graduates (Binks, 1996; Johnson, 2000; Okay & Sahin, 2010). Karunaratne & Perera (2019) also state that internships help students in finding an employment placement by equipping them with industrial experience. Internships have been perceived by students as the bridge to fill the gap between the academic place of learning and the real world (Nevett, 1985). Students can improve several skills, such as time management, communication, motivation, and other required details, by engaging in an internship (Gill & Lashine, 2003; Dennis, 1996). Job networking skills, interviewing skills, creative thinking skills, and higher starting salaries can be gained through internships (Gault et al., 2000). It was found by Gault et al. (2000) that there was a higher job satisfaction among Business Studies students who had completed internships than among those who had not. Taylor (1988) found that there are high employment opportunities for students who have a greater freedom of working during internships.

Despite the positive side of internships, they also provide students with challenges such as huge workloads, incompatibility of the tasks in internships and their study area, less supervision and direction, inadequate access to resources, and unsuitable working conditions (Hashim, 2023). Oliver (2006) states that having shorter time periods for internships is not preferred by students since it does not provide enough time to fully engage as an employee, as there is much knowledge and experience to obtain. Although students are expecting to get a salary or compensation for their work during internships and be considered as usual employees in the organization, employees are viewing them as normal college students and giving tasks accordingly (Hall et al., 1995). Further, Gault et al. (2010) states that there was a lack of qualified employees to supervise undergraduates' internship activities. As per the students' complaints about employers, they have stated that they have been used and exploited as low-cost labour (Rothman, 2007). According to the study conducted by

Karunaratne & Perera (2019), the internship programme did not cover all departments in the organization, and that caused dissatisfaction among them. Further, there was a lack of evaluation conducted by the human resource department about internship activities. Communication, supervision, working environment, and working hours have been identified as main challenges by the students in tourism and hospitality industry internship programmes (Nga et al., 2022).

## **Research Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The research study employed a quantitative approach to gather data on students' internship experiences. A cross-sectional survey design was employed to identify the undergraduates' perception of the internship programme and the challenges they faced.

### **Population and Sampling**

The target population consisted of all the students from the recent two academic batches who have completed an internship in the BSc (Honours) in Agribusiness Management degree programme, Faculty of Agriculture, University of Ruhuna. Accordingly, in Batch 41, 44 students had completed internships in 2023 and in Batch 40, 43 students had completed internships in 2022, making a population of 87 students. The study used a census approach, and a structured questionnaire was distributed to the target population (87) electronically. However, the final sample size was 53 students, which consisted of 33 students who had completed internships in 2023 and 20 students who had completed internships in 2022, based on the response rate. Table 1 depicts the population, sample, and response rate information of the study. Respondents responded to the questionnaire based on voluntary, and the study was based on the voluntary response sampling.

**Table 1.** *Population, sample and response rate information*

Batch	Population	Sample	Response rate
41 (students who completed internships in 2023)	44	33	75%
40 (students who completed internships in 2022)	43	20	46%
Total	87	53	60%

### **Data Collection**

Primary data were collected randomly through an electronically distributed pretested questionnaire. It consisted of different questions that have been developed based on the variables of the objectives. Undergraduates' skill development, benefits gained from internship, and university and industrial place support were measured on a scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree. Students' academic performance (GPA), gender, dwelling setting (rural, urban, and estate, ethnicity (Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim), and preferred IS institute (private, public, NGO) were also taken into consideration as independent variables. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Demographic information**

The sample consisted of 84.9% females, and 58.5% of them were from rural areas. A significant proportion of students demonstrated good academic results in their degree programme, as their GPAs of  $3.30 \leq \text{GPA} < 3.70$  were 39.6% (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Demographic information of the sample

Category		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	8	15.1
	Female	45	84.9
Dwelling Setting	Rural	31	58.5
	Urban	20	37.7
	Estate	2	3.8
Ethnicity	Sinhala	50	94.3
	Tamil	1	1.9
	Muslim	2	3.8

**Preferred and actual internship organization**

According to the responses, 71.7% of the students had an expectation of pursuing industrial training in the private sector, with 24.5% interested in the public sector and 3.85% in non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Although their actual industry training placements were also similar in order, percentages diverged between sectors. Notably, only 58.8% of them had done their IS in the private sector, whereas 34.2% and 7% were in the public sector, and NGO sector. The Industrial Placement Office (IPO) data aligned with these actual sample data (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Expectation and actual IS places

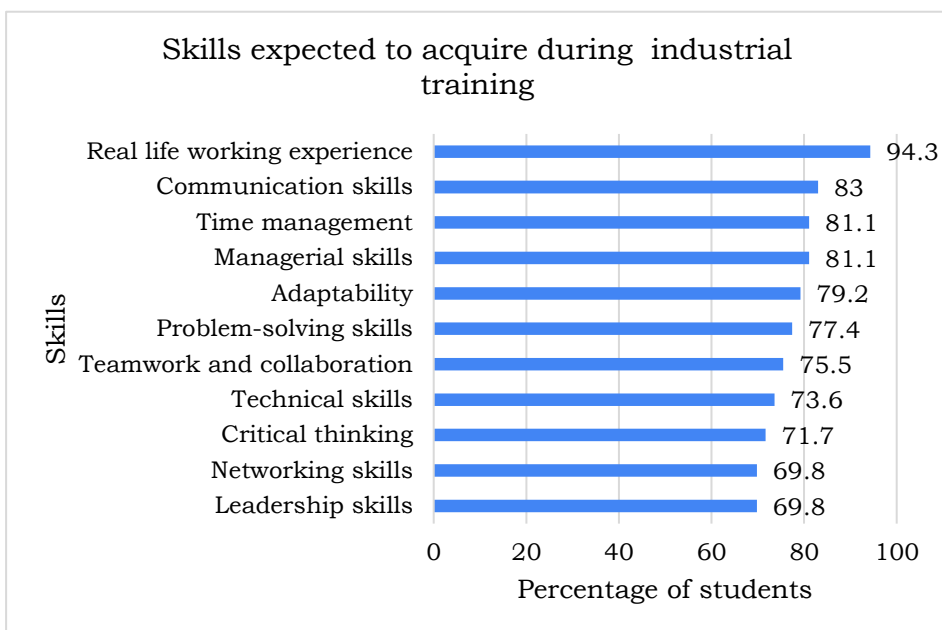
Sector	Expected (%)	Actual-situation (%)	Actual-IPO office data (%)
Private	71.7	58.8	62
Public	24.5	34.2	33.3
NGO	3.85	7	4.7

Furthermore, undergraduates ranked priority choices for organizations where they expected to conduct internships. It ranged from 1 to 6, with the following in descending order: agribusiness private companies, agricultural research institutions, agribusiness government companies, banking sector organizations, and service sector like teaching, etc. When considering their actual internship placement, it was similar to their expectations. About 44.4% of them had completed their internship in agribusiness private sector companies. Further, the banking sector was the third organization where students completed industrial training (14.8%). However, a similar number of students (7.4%) had received opportunities for their internships in agriculture research institutes, the service sector institutes, and agribusiness related government companies. Relevant staff members responsible for the undergraduate internship should consider this information, and undergraduates should always be directed to select the private sector institutes for their internship because the private sector is the engine of the Sri Lankan economy. Moreover, 52% found their internship place through personal connections, while 26.4% found it through university staff and 22.6% found it via the university IPO office. This finding clearly illustrates the significance of the interpersonal relation in this regard. Benhabib (1992) points out that communication with different types of people is essential to comprehend and appreciate the diverse perspectives of others. In this context, results proved that effective communication plays a role in finding internships for undergraduates. In the digital media environment, individuals may have more chances in recognizing the heterogeneous perspectives of others as they inadvertently expose themselves to diverse information and exchange various opinions with others in online and social media platforms (Kim et al., 2013). Further, the core value of using social media is that it builds interpersonal relationships through making new friends via trivial interaction or participating in social community activities as well as through enabling people to socially support each other. Therefore, it is very important that the policy makers think in line with the faculty in

this regard.

### **Undergraduates' expectations of the specific skills they are expected to acquire during their internship**

According to the results, 94.3% of the undergraduates anticipate acquiring real-life work experience, followed by communication skills (83%), time management skills (81.1%), managerial skills (81.1%), and adaptability skills from industrial training (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Specific skills undergraduates are expected to acquire during their industrial training

Undergraduates have met their expectations of gaining different skills through industrial exposure, as they strongly agree (4.5) that the industrial experience significantly contributed to the improvement of their skills, such as real-life working experience, managerial skills, communication skills, time management skills, and adaptability skills. Moreover, they agree (4) that technical

skills, problem-solving skills, teamwork and collaboration, critical thinking, networking skills, and leadership skills can be achieved through training. More importantly, they perceive that skills acquired during industrial experience are relevant to their future careers (Table 4). It is evident that there are four main categories of career preparation skills, such as communication, academic, interpersonal, and job acquisition, based on several research studies. A well-designed and effective internship programme must equip students with these skills in order to face real-world problems upon graduation (Moghaddam, 2011).

**Table 4.** *Student's skill development in industrial training*

Skill development		Mean rank
The industrial experience significantly contributed to the improvement of my...	Real life work experience	4.5
	Managerial skills	4.5
	Communication skills	4.5
	Time management	4.5
	Adaptability	4.5
	Technical skills	4.4
	Problem-solving skills	4.4
	Teamwork and collaboration	4.4
	Critical thinking	4.4
	Networking skills	4.1
The skills I acquired during industrial experience are relevant to my future career.	Leadership skills	4.0
		4.4

**Expected vs. actual benefits from internship experience**

The main benefits that they expected to acquire during their internship experience have been ranked from 1 to 7. Accordingly, the first priority was gaining practical skills through the application of academic knowledge, followed by getting industry exposure and understanding, personality development and skill

enhancement, networking and public relations opportunities, potential job placement, contributing to your community, and obtaining valuable insights for launching your own business.

The industrial training allowed them to achieve most of the expected benefits from the training. The results revealed that industrial training offered learning opportunities and improved the skills and knowledge of undergraduates (Table 5). Moreover, the activities that they engaged in were relevant to their field. Renganathan et al. (2012) states that there is a difference between knowledge and experience acquired from the classroom and from an internship. This highlights that university education is formal and guided by the academic staff, while internships facilitate informal experiential learning. Undergraduates have been exposed to relevant real-world agribusiness practices during their training. The internship serves as a link between theoretical and practical application, and it is the students' first meaningful exposure to the real-world work experience where they are studying (Koo et al., 2016). Although they had the opportunity to apply their theoretical knowledge in real-world situations, they encountered several challenges as per their perception. Students had sufficient networking opportunities in the agribusiness field, which had a positive impact on starting their career (Table 05). According to Karunaratne (2019), internships provide students with a favorable learning environment and provide opportunities to form relationships, improve self-assurance, and develop social interaction abilities.

However, there are only 32.1% of the students who have found permanent job positions after completing the internship industrial training, with 18.9% of them working in the same place where they completed the training, while 2% got a permanent job similar to their place and 11.3% found a job in a different place. Although the industry and universities work together to enhance both academic and professional lives, there is significant unemployment among them due to external factors such as the country's current

economic situation. The best solution that can be suggested is to increase students' orientation towards becoming entrepreneurs. The students' expectations of starting their own business after getting exposure to industrial training were determined. Accordingly, 51% of them had an expectation of starting this, and it includes a variety of business ideas such as animal feed production, tea production business, vegetable and fruit export companies, floriculture-related business, and nursery plants. In addition to this, they had some non-agricultural business ideas, including clothing, garments, and pharmaceutical businesses.

**Table 5.** *Benefits gained from the internships*

Benefits	Mean rank
The programme provided a different learning experience.	4.5
The tasks and activities assigned for me to conduct were relevant for my field.	4.1
My knowledge and skills were effectively enhanced by the learning opportunities I had during the training.	4.4
The skills I acquired during industrial experience are relevant to my future career.	4.4
The programme provided me with valuable exposure to real-world agribusiness practices.	4.0
During the industrial training, I was able to apply my theoretical knowledge to real world situations.	4.1
During the industrial training, I encountered challenges when applying theoretical concepts in practical scenarios.	4.1
The programme provided me with networking opportunities with professionals in the agribusiness industry	4.0
Networking during the industrial training had a positive impact on my career in the industry	4.0

This indicates the potential of increasing students in the entrepreneurial aspects and required actions should be made. A study conducted in Indonesia found that entrepreneurial internships can significantly increase students' entrepreneurial intentions, even if they do not have any at the beginning of the internship (Sahban, 2016). Wickramarachchi (2008) states that required initiatives should be employed to make entrepreneurs and managers in order to decrease the employability issues.

### **University and industrial place support**

Students have received the required facilitation from the university IPO as well as the industrial training place. Moreover, they got frequent feedback from supervisors in order to improve their skills and knowledge (Table 6). When considering the overall satisfaction with the industrial training place, most of them were satisfied (92.5%) with it, and most of them (88.6%) recommended it for future students.

**Table 6.** *University and industrial place support*

University and industrial place support	Mean rank
The university IPO provided me with required facilities to complete the industrial training.	4.5
The industrial training place provided me with the required facilities to complete the industrial training.	4.4
I received frequent feedback from my supervisor during the training period.	4.5

### **The major challenges faced by undergraduates during the training period**

The challenges that the students faced have been identified descriptively, and they have been divided into four categories. It includes training-related challenges, personal challenges, working environment-related challenges, and university-related challenges (Figure 2). Training-related challenges include long working hours,

high work-load, meeting deadlines, and reluctance to assign responsibilities to intern students. These challenges have arisen primarily because they are new to the industry and students struggle to adapt to its culture. Long working hours and high work load can impact on the overall well-being of the students and their overall effectiveness. The hesitation of delegating work to others can reduce their ability to get hands-on experience and skill development. The students are assigned simple manual duties, including printing and photocopying (Khuong, 2016), where the students have less interest in the delegation of responsibilities during internship (Nghia & My Duyen, 2018). Long distances to reach the training place, no salary, financial management difficulties, communication challenges with the English language, and struggling with work-life balance are the major personal challenges. Finding an industrial place considering geographical proximity is important while considering financial management. The absence of financial compensation is a common challenge for students in many industrial training programmes.

Students faced work environment-related challenges such as working with people from diverse backgrounds, adaptation challenges due to a varied workforce, difficulty fitting in with the organizational culture, and handling labor. These challenges highlight the need to foster a supportive organizational environment that values diversity, improves interpersonal relationships, and provides mentorships and cultural competence workshops in order to create a more inclusive and harmonious environment. Difficulty in getting agribusiness-related experience during training, lack of practical knowledge, lack of field knowledge due to the primary exposure to economic subjects, and an insufficient time period of training to get more experience are major university-related challenges in industrial training that students face. According to Subbiah (2017), the six-week internship is inadequate for students to secure full-time employment. Adjusting the work environment for students requires time, and extending the time period will enhance the students' learning skills as well

as their future job prospects. This underscores the importance of curriculum improvement, ensuring students have the required knowledge and skills in the agribusiness field, and extending the time duration to better prepare them for the industrial world. Prior awareness and guidance on the internship programme should be done in order to understand the university, the industrial place, and the students' expectations of the internship. According to Karunaratne (2019), internship orientation reduces the disparity in expectations between related parties.

<p><b>Training related challenges</b></p>	<p><b>Personal challenges</b></p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Long working hours</li> <li>2. High work-load</li> <li>3. Meeting deadlines</li> <li>4. Reluctance to assign responsibilities for intern student</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Long distance in reaching the training place</li> <li>2. No salary</li> <li>3. Financial management difficulties</li> <li>4. Communication challenges with English language</li> <li>5. Struggling with work life balance</li> </ol>
<p><b>Working environment related challenges</b></p>	<p><b>University related challenges</b></p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Working with people from diverse backgrounds</li> <li>2. Adaptation challenges due to varied workforce</li> <li>3. Difficulty in fitting into the organizational culture</li> <li>4. Handling labours</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Difficulty in getting agribusiness related experience during training</li> <li>2. Lack of practical knowledge</li> <li>3. Lack of field knowledge due to the primary exposure to the economic subjects</li> <li>4. Time period is not enough to get more experience</li> </ol>

**Figure 2.** Challenges faced by students

## **Suggestions to improve the programme**

As per the students' suggestions, it includes increasing industrial training to at least 3 months, improving the student's soft skills prior to the training, and providing more agribusiness-related organizations for students to select from for internship. The study suggests that it should enhance university and industry collaboration to create a win-win situation and diversify industrial training opportunities. Moreover, it can be suggested to incorporate entrepreneurial aspirations in order to encourage students to start their own businesses as a remedy for unemployment. Agribusiness management undergraduates have been equipped with the necessary theoretical knowledge required for entering the industry, and that providing industry exposure will have a positive impact on their entrepreneurial intentions.

## **Conclusions**

The graduates' expectations were realized upon completion of the training. This indicates the effectiveness of the training programme as well as the students' commitment and professional capacity to achieve the required outcomes. 71.7% of them initially anticipated pursuing internships in the private sector, followed by the public sector (24.5%) and NGOs (3.85%). The actual data aligns with this order, but there are some variations with percentages. Real-life working experience, managerial skills, communication skills, time management skills, and adaptability skills are the major skills that they successfully attained as expected before commencing the training. Similar findings were stated by several other researchers, stating internships improve these types of skills of the undergraduates (Gill & Lashine, 2003; Beck & Halim, 2008; Sapp & Zhang, 2009). Moreover, students experience the expected benefits, including gaining practical skills through the application of academic knowledge, followed by industry exposure and understanding, personality development and skill enhancement, networking, and public relations opportunities. Manickam & Chin

(2015) also found that internships provide students with the opportunity to apply academic knowledge and skills acquired in the universities and to get experiences. Further, internships allow undergraduates to increase networking, industry exposure, and satisfaction with their careers (Weible, 2009). However, obtaining potential job placements was not achieved. In contrast, the findings of Meththananda et al. (2018) indicate the strong positive relationship between internship training and employability. Despite the required skills, benefits are achieved through training, but a low level of employment still remains due to the prevailing external factors. Sri Lanka struggles with various social, economic, and political issues that can have an impact on the job market. As per the International Labour Organization (2023), the Sri Lankan economic crisis in 2022 has impacted the labour market as well as labour force participation. Encouraging and supporting entrepreneurial initiatives could encourage students to become job creators rather than job seekers, and 51% of students had an expectation of starting various business initiatives. Despite facing challenges such as training-related, personal, working environment-related, and university-related challenges during the training, they have received the necessary support from the university and the industrial training place. Support, feedback, and supervision from both the university and employer have a great impact on the quality of the internship experience (Narayanan et al., 2010).

### **Competing interests**

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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