BRIDGING THE CAREER READINESS GAP:
EXAMINING THE PROMISE OF VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS

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Abstract

This mixed methods study explored the perspectives of 14 graduate students in a virtual instructional technology (IT) internship. Guided by the authentic learning framework, the research identified perceived value, support needs, preparation gaps, and improvement opportunities. Findings revealed interns valued applying knowledge to real projects, developing professional skills, and receiving mentorship. Participants desired pre-internship technology training and clear expectations. Proactively developing time management, organization, and communication abilities was crucial. Though limited to one program, the study provides insights for designing effective virtual internships aligned with authentic learning principles.

Keywords: Virtual internships, instructional technology, authentic learning, work-integrated learning, online experiential learning, graduate education.

1. Introduction

Virtual internships offer remote, practical experiences for students to develop professional skills (Feldman, 2021; Jeske & Axtell, 2014). However, research on graduate virtual IT internships is limited. This mixed methods study investigates 14 graduate students' perspectives to uncover the value, supports, preparation needs, and improvement suggestions for a virtual IT internship program. Findings can inform best practices in virtual internship design and delivery.

2. Literature review

Virtual internships provide hands-on learning without traditional constraints (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018; Hora et al., 2021). They offer flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and accessibility advantages (Pittenger, 2021). Successful virtual internships require clear objectives, regular communication, and strong mentoring (Hruska et al., 2022; Jackson, 2019). Challenges include limited supervision and missing in-person culture immersion (Crowell et al., 2022). However, the literature suggests virtual internships can deliver valuable experience and preparation.

3. Methods

This mixed methods study used inductive qualitative coding to identify themes from 14 graduate students' journals and surveys. The authentic learning framework's nine characteristics guided evaluation. Likert-scale items were analyzed with descriptive statistics. Research questions explored perceptions, value, modifications, and preparation needs.

4. Findings

Qualitative analysis revealed participants viewed the internship as providing meaningful workplace exposure, knowledge and skills for career readiness, and expanded networking. Technology training and clear expectations were recommended. Communication, software, time management, and planning skills were deemed crucial. Quantitative results supported the value of real-world projects and skill development.

The internship exhibited several authentic learning characteristics: real-world relevance, knowledge articulation, expert scaffolding, and multiple perspectives. Sustained collaboration and complex problem-solving were less evident.

5. Discussion

This study provides evidence that virtual internships enable authentic skill-building and career clarity for graduate students. Practical applications, networking, tailored scaffolding, and reflection proved impactful. Participants agreed the virtual format allowed flexibility and real-world experience. Communication, industry tools, and time management were key development areas. Findings suggest virtual internships can provide meaningful preparation with authentic tasks and strong mentorship.

Intern perceptions aligned with literature-noted virtual internship advantages (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018; Feldman, 2021). Over 80% of responses highlighted the value of practical projects. Mentor relationships offered critical guidance and support. The internship strongly exhibited the authentic learning characteristics of real-world relevance, knowledge articulation, expert scaffolding, and multiple perspectives.

6. Conclusion

This mixed methods study explored graduate student perspectives on a virtual IT internship's value, supports, preparation needs, and improvement recommendations. Findings revealed deepened workplace competencies, expanded networks, and refined self-concepts. With thoughtful design and mentoring, virtual internships can facilitate rich, accessible professional preparation. Additional research with larger, comparative samples across disciplines is recommended. Each participant's unique growth highlights the promise of online experiential learning for all.

7. Implications

To enhance virtual IT internships, programs should:
1. Require software proficiency or provide training access
2. Simulate virtual teamwork in courses
3. Offer professional skill workshops
4. Establish regular mentor check-ins with clear expectations
5. Proactively assess and address skills gaps
   For practitioners, recommended supports include:
1. Providing clear project milestones upfront
2. Requiring intern progress reports
3. Conducting skills assessments
4. Encouraging feedback
5. Gathering post-internship evaluations

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