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### Internship

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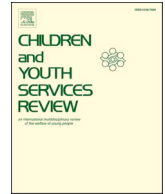
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# Internship: Breaking the vicious unemployment cycle for vulnerable youth

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## ABSTRACT

Vulnerable youth are often trapped in the vicious circle of “no experience, no job; no job, no experience.” Internship programs may help them overcome this cycle through offering work experience. A BEAM model is proposed. It includes four essential attributes for enhancing employability, which most vulnerable youth often lack. This study examined a one-year internship program for vulnerable youth. The youth rated their work abilities, increasing from an average of 5.2 out of 10 before joining the program to 7.3 out of 10 after participating. Focus group sessions were also conducted in two rounds with the vulnerable youth (N:18), along with their mentors (N:14) who work with them, and case managers (N:10) who offered guidance. Results show that this approach is promising and it is worth offering targeted internship training opportunities for this group of young people in order to prepare them for entry into the labor market.

## 1. Introduction

Challenges in the school-to-work transition that deserve interventions are, by and large, associated with the high youth unemployment rates in many countries (International Labour Office, 2022). Youth who encounter difficulties in accessing the labor market not only have a higher risk of poverty but a higher risk of engaging in antisocial behaviors and becoming socially isolated (Gunderson & Fazio, 2014). In the post-pandemic era, the global labor market situation has improved for young people, reaching the lowest rate in 15 years. But in 2023, 21.7 % of young people still fall into the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) category, according to the International Labour Organization (2024).

Vulnerable youth often find themselves in the NEET category (Rahmani & Groot, 2023), and assisting them in breaking free from their current difficulties is worth exploring (Frøyland, 2024). Although the definition of vulnerable youth may vary, they can be defined as “youth aged 15–25 who are at risk of or have already dropped out of school or have difficulties finding and keeping a job” (Frøyland, 2024, n.p.). Such youth are often characterized as having low educational qualifications, a lack of labor market experience, low confidence, learning difficulties, and weak social capital (Cooper & Guyn Cooper Research Associates, 2018).

Internships are often used for facilitating the school-to-work transition, especially among university students (Neyt, Verhaest, & Baert, 2019), but little attention has been given to its application for assisting

vulnerable youth in pursuing their employment goals. Since many internship programs are designed for university students, such programs are typically focused on enhancing the intern’s professional capabilities. However, when offering internship programs for vulnerable youth, this focus may need to be adjusted. A pragmatic, functional approach is needed to guide the design of internship programs for these youth. Hence, the BEAM model is presented in this article. This proposed model, which consists of four essential components, helps explain the challenges facing vulnerable youth while also identifying the domains that internships should target.

Through exploring an internship program in Hong Kong, this study aims to address the challenges faced by school dropouts with low educational qualifications, specifically examining how internship programs can improve their employability. By highlighting the unique barriers these vulnerable youth encounter in the job market, the present article represents an attempt to explore whether and how internship programs may help improve their employability. It first describes the vicious cycle facing vulnerable youth and the barriers for them to enter the labor market. It then introduces the BEAM model, which was derived from literature. The methods, findings and discussion sections follow.

### 1.1. Vicious cycle of “no experience, no job; no job, no experience”

Employment difficulties encountered by school dropouts are particularly challenging, as these youth are usually unprepared for the specialized demands of the knowledge economy (Millenky, 2016).

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Hence, they are more likely to be negatively affected by unemployment (Pohlan, 2019). Lacking work experience and the skills needed for the job market means it is usually hard for vulnerable youth to get a job. As such, they may lack the opportunities to accumulate work experience for their resume and neglect to develop social skills through interactions at work to fit future employment opportunities. Even when they land an entry-level job, it may not last long due to low motivation and unclear career objectives, which may result in being unemployed again (Newton et al., 2020).

The above-mentioned situation is often referred to as the vicious cycle of “no experience, no job; no job, no experience” (Oswald-Egg & Renold, 2021). University graduates may use their qualifications to break the cycle, as employers tend to expect or at least prefer higher qualifications to fill an open position, even when the job requires limited education and skills (Tunstall et al., 2012). Unlike high school or university graduates, vulnerable youth may not even have the basic qualifications required as an “entry ticket” to a position in the labor market.

Without appropriate interventions, these vulnerable youth may become “NEET. Although there is a need to provide better career preparation and support for school leavers (Biavaschi et al., 2012), teachers may not be in a good position to provide career training. Given that the economy is ever-changing, job types provided by and job skills required by students’ future employers may not be clearly identified (Nambiar et al., 2019). Furthermore, school dropouts who fail to complete higher secondary education may not benefit from school career preparation programs.

### 1.2. Barriers for vulnerable youth to enter the labor market

There are a number of barriers for vulnerable youth to enter to the labor market, as indicated in the literature. These four barriers include 1) inadequate basic soft skills (B), 2) having unrealistic expectations toward work (E), 3) poor job attitude (A), and 4) a lack of marketable hard skills (M).

First, inadequate basic soft skills create obstacles for vulnerable youth to become employed. In a workplace, soft skills reflect an individual’s capability of communication and interaction with coworkers (Deepa & Seth, 2013). Soft skills are so important that they are prioritized for potential employment in various job types or industries (Robles, 2012). Employers who may hire vulnerable youth also consider soft skills vital to their employment decisions (Hossain & Terwelp, 2015). However, a lack of soft skills is often found among early school leavers (Shury et al., 2010), and this significantly impedes their job interview performance, reducing their employability (Kaburise, 2016).

Second, having unrealistic expectations toward work is another barrier preventing vulnerable youth from gainful employment. It is vital for vulnerable youth to be realistic about the labor market so that they know that their expectations are more likely to be achieved (Ose & Jensen, 2017). Yet, these youth may often set unrealistic goals for themselves if they do not have adequate knowledge about job opportunities and employers’ expectations (Matschke, 2023). Due to limited work experience, they tend to expect higher accomplishments at work when compared to older people (Podmenik & Gorišek, 2020). The problem is considered a major barrier for vulnerable youth in gaining employment (Ose & Jensen, 2017).

Third, their attitude to work may also affect their path to obtaining or sustaining employment. A poor job attitude is characterized by being late and irresponsible in the workplace (Hollywood et al., 2012) and is of great concern to employers, as it is associated with poor work performance (Abun et al., 2021). By contrast, a proper job attitude enables youth to approach the work world with passion and develop eagerness to learn (CBI, 2012). Having a positive work attitude is particularly important for youth who are first entering the world of work. In considering the job applications from vulnerable youth, employers focus on attitude toward work rather than cognitive ability, particularly pertaining to a candidate’s trainability (Solga & Kohlrausch, 2013).

Although problems associated with poor job attitude are common among young people, the transition to work by vulnerable youth is more impeded by their negative job attitude (Hollywood et al., 2012).

Finally, a lack of marketable hard skills limits the employability of youth with vulnerable backgrounds. Unlike soft skills, hard skills are job-specific abilities. From an employment perspective, technical skills refer to the knowledge or expertise necessary to perform tasks in specific careers or industries (Lyu & Liu 2021). Such technical skills are more attainable for individuals who have pursued a higher level of education that allows a major in specific fields. The lower level of education typically provides general knowledge of diverse subjects that do not equip youth with the expertise to work in certain industries (Fletcher & Tyson, 2017). Some vulnerable youth may lack fundamental skills such as literacy and numeracy (Vallejo & Dooly, 2013), but these are considered critical in employability (Bynner, 2012).

The above review of literature not only indicates four important employability attributes affecting vulnerable youth in their transition to work, but also potentially informs the design of internship programs for this population. The four components are summarized in the BEAM model we propose (see Fig. 1).

## 2. Internship program as an intervention

Internship programs are widely adopted to facilitate young people’s transition into the labor market (Stewart et al., 2021), but further exploration of the effectiveness of such programs is required (O’Higgins & Pinedo, 2018). An internship can be regarded as “a form of work-based learning” (Stewart et al., 2021, p. 20), which should be time-limited (Thomlison & Corcoran, 2007). The benefits of an internship for young people are documented in the literature. Major benefits include the enhancement of personal competencies, career direction, work habits, and work skills (Hasbullah & Sulaiman, 2002; Ismail, 2018; Maertz et al., 2014). In the context of internships for university students, Maertz and his colleagues (2014, p. 129) came to the conclusion that “[i]nternship projects can make students more marketable.” This description may also be true for vulnerable youth (Mseleku, 2022), and the benefits an internship brings are precisely important for them to enhance their employability, as indicated in the BEAM model.

Offering internship programs for vulnerable youth may be a promising approach to support them in taking the next step into the world of work (Newton et al., 2020). As the learning experience provided by internship programs is more practically oriented, these programs tend to

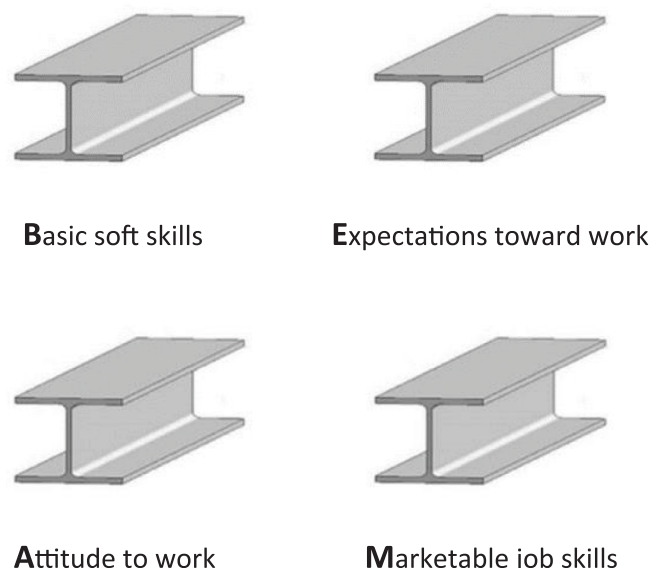


Fig. 1. Proposed BEAM model.

be suitable for school dropouts who are usually academically disadvantaged. The programs may be offered to nonstudents, and school dropouts can also participate and benefit from such programs. By working with others as interns, young people can build social connections (Tuccillo, 2021).

Despite the fact that internship programs are fairly common globally, the definition of the term “internship” is far from clear (Stewart et al., 2021). Different kinds of internships can vary from context to context. Internship programs may be offered by schools or universities as a part of training programs (Karunaratne & Perera, 2019). Others are arranged between interns and employers (Maertz et al., 2014). Internship programs may also be provided by employment service providers for people with employment difficulties (Stewart et al., 2021). Internships might be paid or unpaid (Rogers et al., 2021) and in part-time or full time-modes (Maertz et al., 2014). The duration of these programs also varies from a few weeks to an entire year (Waas, 2021). It is worth noting that intern positions for vulnerable youth, including school dropouts, are rare (Perlin, 2012).

There has been a growing body of literature that explores the job design and benefits of internship programs in recent years. Some evidence shows that internship programs tend to be more effective when employers are highly involved, when the internship program is structurally designed, and when mentoring support is available (Knouse & Fontenot, 2008). The research literature, mostly written by management scholars, focuses on internships for university students and/or graduates. Yet, few studies of internship programs for vulnerable youth are currently available. The present article attempts to fill the gap in the literature by using a case study method, with the aim of shedding light on the use of internship programs in enhancing the employability of vulnerable youth. A recent study was conducted by Thouin and colleagues (2023) on the benefits of paid jobs for vulnerable youth. Still, qualitative studies on this aspect are very limited. Given that such youth are often trapped in a vicious cycle of “no experience, no job; no job, no experience,” it is practically important to examine the possible benefits and challenges of utilizing internship programs in supporting vulnerable youth in taking their first step into the world of work.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Context

The internship program this study investigated was conducted by an NGO in Hong Kong. The program aimed to assist participating vulnerable youth in enhancing their job skills and experience, and successfully realizing their personal career plans through a one-year internship program. The first two authors operated independently from the NGO, and were commissioned to conduct an evaluation and understand service effectiveness while accumulating practical experience. The program participants were vulnerable youth between 15 and 24 years old with sub-degree or lower educational qualifications, and who met one of the following criteria: (a) having a low educational level (Grade 9 or below), (b) having emotional or behavioral problems, and (c) having learning difficulties. All participants were placed in intern jobs at service units of the NGO. Each of them earned approximately US\$1,277 per month, which was about US\$450 higher than the statutory minimum wage for the same working hours.

#### 3.2. Participants

Ethics approval was obtained from the affiliated institution of the first author. Semi-structured focus group sessions were conducted by two moderators who have extensive experience in conducting this kind of data collection. For each phase, eight focus group discussions were arranged to interview three categories of participants: mentors, case managers, and trainees (the vulnerable youth). The inclusion of the three sources helped ensure the reliability of the findings (Shenton,

2004).

In Phase 1, 42 participants were recruited across the three categories: 14 mentors, 10 case managers, and 18 trainees. They were referred by the manager running the internship program, and according to the inclusion criteria, they must have participated in the internship program as trainees or staff. Trainees must have faced employment difficulties and/or be early school leavers, and their average age was 20.6, ranging from 17 to 25. Among the trainees, there were 13 females and five males. The number of participants in each group ranged from four to 10. Phase 2 recruited 38 participants across the three categories, of which 17 were mentors, seven were case managers, and 14 were trainees. The number of participants in each group ranged from three to 10.

#### 3.3. Procedure

Interview guides were prepared to ensure that certain topics were discussed during the group sessions. Before the commencement of the focus groups, informed consent was obtained from all participants. Two phases of focus groups were conducted during the middle and at the end of the program, with a six-month interval between the two. Researchers can have a better understanding of their situations before going to the second phase. As researchers gained insights from the first phase, we refined the questions accordingly. The differences in and changes of the trainees could also be better captured by comparing the interviews of focus groups in the two phases. The first phase included eight group sessions held three months after the commencement of the program. The second phase consisted of eight sessions held at the end, in the last session of the program. A total of 16 sessions were held: four for mentors, four for case managers, two for staff from the organizing unit, and six for trainees. The number of participants in the trainee groups ranged from four to seven. The group sizes of the mentors and the case managers varied from three to 10 participants. Each session lasts 1.5 to 2 h. These sessions consisted of semi-structured conversations, primarily utilizing open-ended questions. Some examples are “What changes do you think the internship experience brings to them?” and “What is the most valuable aspect of this program?” Besides qualitative feedback, the trainees were invited to conduct self-evaluations conducted at the beginning and the end of the program.

The qualitative data from the focus group interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed into text, which was subsequently analyzed using a thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first two authors conducted a review of the transcripts and compared the original audio recording when needed. The initial codes were identified by the first two authors after independently reading through the transcripts. Repeated close readings were conducted to identify themes that related to the research objectives, and the data were then coded accordingly. Negative case analysis was conducted and possible drawbacks of this approach were identified (Tenzek, 2017). Reflexivity was employed to review the first two authors’ understanding and perspectives. The first two authors discussed the identified themes and referred to the transcripts when necessary to reach an agreement on the codes and themes.

### 4. Findings

On the whole, comments on the internship program collected from different stakeholders were positive. The youth participants considered the internship program to have a transformative effect. Based on the self-evaluations done by the trainees at the beginning and the end of the program, most trainees had increased scores (only one trainee gave the same score in both evaluations), resulting in an overall average that increased significantly from 5.2 to 7.3 out of 10. There have not been noticeable differences in outcomes in age or gender. The trainees considered this program has the potential to break the vicious cycle of unemployment.

At least I have one year of experience as an activity assistant through my internship. If I were to seek similar jobs outside, I can tell employers that I have one year of internship experience, which gives me some confidence. I can confidently say that I have actually done it. (Bonnie, trainee, F, aged 24)

The mentors involved in the program expressed similar opinions regarding the effectiveness of the program. They recognized the inherent value of the program's idea, considering that providing work experience to these youth is a helpful stepping stone for their development.

The simplest thing is that after the trainees complete the program, they can count it as one year of work experience, regardless of the circumstances. (Mandy, mentor, F)

It allows young people to learn and work at the same time, learning on the job, because in an open workplace, these opportunities are not readily available. (Lily, case manager, F)

Although the participants generally rated the program positively, some mentors pointed out that a few trainees were frequently absent or late. It was not easy to dismiss them, which inadvertently allows this kind of behavior to continue. Some trainees also admitted to being lazy, and this did not affect their salary they earned.

Besides the overall evaluation of the program, participants discussed how the program enhanced the employability of the trainees.

#### 4.1. Theme #1: Enhancing their basic soft skills

First, the internship program provided real opportunities for trainees to develop their basic soft skills. They learned to communicate with others in the work settings. This was especially significant for these trainees with weaker communication skills and who had limited exposure to workplace communications.

In my interactions with colleagues or service users, I have also learned some things. For example, I used to be hesitant to speak with unfamiliar people, but now I'm more comfortable and can even have conversations at times. (Alan, trainee, M, aged 19)

They also realized the importance of being flexible and learned communication skills for adapting to different circumstances.

I've learned different techniques, such as simplifying explanations when communicating with children or older people, using a slightly exaggerated and louder tone when communicating with older people. When they can't hear me, I try to repeat what I heard and ask, "Is that correct?" I also consider the language perspective when they speak. (Alice, trainee, F, aged 24)

The program fostered a sense of work responsibility, as the youth entered their work settings with support from mentors, and colleagues.

I used to have frequent absences when I was studying, but I have been consistent with this program for a year. That's the progress I made, sticking with it for a year. You know how poor my attendance used to be, but in this past year, I only took sick leave for one day, and other than that, I haven't missed any days. (David, trainee, M, aged 19)

Not only did they develop their abilities to follow the workplace norm but also the ability to follow instructions.

I've noticed that his [a trainee's] understanding ability has gradually improved. Initially, he could only follow one instruction to complete a task, but now I can give him several instructions, and he can perform different tasks. (Charles, mentor, M)

Through on-the-job learning opportunities provided in the program, these trainees gradually acquired basic soft skills for navigating within the world of work.

#### 4.2. Theme #2: Supporting them in setting reasonable expectations toward work

Despite the youth having limited knowledge about the world of work as well as limited planning for their own career paths, the program enabled the trainees to develop realistic expectations toward work. It offered them a chance to gain insights into their own interests and strengths, which would inform their future development.

I have gained more knowledge and understanding, which has increased my interest in clerical work. (Joyce, trainee, F, aged 22)

The one-year practical experience facilitated trainees in making career choices based on practical considerations, rather than relying on unrealistic impressions.

A year's time is actually just right. For me, in this past year, apart from enhancing my abilities, it has helped me confirm my direction. (Zoe, trainee, F, aged 21)

Recently, he told me that initially he wanted to study courses related to early childhood work, but now he doesn't want to. He realized that what he truly wants to do is something related to art creation or design. Why did he say that? It turns out that during the entire internship process, many colleagues encouraged him to try different things. After trying some design-related activities, he discovered that he really enjoys them. He took the initiative to learn drawing and other graphic-related skills and found them to be a good fit for him. (Tony, mentor, M)

Understanding market requirements provided the participants with the motivation to enhance their skills and abilities.

After working for a year, the trainees start to think and realize that a junior high school education is not sufficient to find a job. They may consider how to equip themselves and reflect on what kind of work suits them best. They will actively explore and search suitable job opportunities. (Cherry, mentor, F)

Hence, this program served as a self-discovery process, allowing the trainees to broaden their horizons, discover new possibilities, and make informed decisions about their career trajectories.

#### 4.3. Theme #3: Fostering a positive work attitude

The findings indicate that the program fostered a positive work attitude among the trainees. For example, the trainees demonstrated a genuine interest in their work and took pleasure in their progress.

I feel very happy every time I complete a task because it gives me a sense of accomplishment. The summer vacation is the happiest time for me because there are more tasks to do. It's super exciting to have three or four activities in a day. I don't like being bored. If I have to just sit around, it gets really dull. (Candy, trainee, F, aged 24)

Moreover, some of them became receptive and they perceived the feedback provided by their mentors as an opportunity for improving their work.

Also, the mentor provided me with a lot of feedback and reflection whenever I do something, which helps me become clearer about my direction and what I need to do. (Lily, trainee, F, aged 21)

They willingly took responsibility for their actions and were willing to apologize when necessary. This level of accountability was highly appreciated by a mentor, as it was not something to be taken for granted.

He takes the initiative to apologize and says, "I'm sorry, I made a mistake." I was very surprised by this. I was really surprised, like, "Wow, he actually apologized?" The apology is sincere. So I think it's a change in attitude. (Nelson, mentor, M)

Despite their lack of experience, the participants displayed an ability to consistently improve their job performance. Both mentors and case managers witnessed their growth:

Some of the participants themselves were very passive and just wanted to pass this year lazily. However, I've seen an improvement in their sense of responsibility and work abilities. I've also heard colleagues saying that they have started to care about their future careers. (Janet, mentor, F)

I believe the program provides them with the best thing, which is perseverance.... It [the internship] may become more challenging as they progress from level 1 to level 2 to level 3, but as their resilience increases, they themselves will feel that they are making progress. (Lawrence, case manager, M)

The positive work attitude they learned in the internship program is helpful for their future success, helping them to have continuous growth and development.

#### 4.4. Theme #4: Equipping the youth with marketable job skills

In practice, the trainees had the opportunity to acquire various job-related skills, which enhanced their confidence.

I have learned many skills in my work, and I feel that they will be helpful for future jobs and have increased my confidence. (Queenie, trainee, F, aged 22)

Initially, they were assigned relatively simple tasks, but as they gained the trust of their supervisors and colleagues, they were given more challenging assignments.

My colleagues are willing to mentor me. Sometimes, financial documents and tasks may not normally be assigned to us, but they are willing to let me get involved. It's a certain level of trust in me. (Mary, trainee, F, aged 21)

This internship program effectively facilitated their skills development and encouraged them to learn practical skills from colleagues.

I can gain more knowledge in media and IT aspects. In my center, there is a colleague who excels in this field. Sometimes, when he has free time, I take the opportunity to ask him if he can spare some time to guide me in various skills. (Tom, trainee, M, aged 19)

Besides learning from others, useful skills can be learned by self-learning, as there is a genuine need for continuous learning.

I also appreciate that he has self-learned Cangjie input method [for entering Chinese characters into a computer] even though I don't know the input method. (Eva, case manager, F)

The acquisition of marketable job skills was undoubtedly beneficial for their preparedness to enter the job market. Nevertheless, even more valuable was the development of their learning capacities, which enabled them to acquire new skills through learning from others and engaging in self-learning.

## 5. Discussion

This study demonstrates the advantages of using internship programs for enhancing the employability of vulnerable youth in the attributes of the BEAM model. After the internship, the participating youth were able to improve their basic soft skills, including communication with colleagues, supervisors, and personnel in senior positions. They also became more capable of interacting with service users. The second attribute, expectation toward work, was enhanced after the program. The youth were more realistic about work opportunities because they learned about their own interests and strengths and became clearer about their future development. They needed to communicate with

colleagues and complete the assigned tasks, which allowed them to comprehend the requirements in an authentic working environment. Moreover, the youth developed better job attitudes toward work. The sense of responsibility was nurtured with a growing participation in the program. They learned to be persistent and build resilience. Lastly, marketable hard skills gained by the youth were enhanced because they acquired technical job skills through a solid one-year internship experience, which is valuable for consideration by future employers. These results are similar to those of studies on internship programs (Hasbullah & Sulaiman, 2002; Ismail, 2018; Maertz et al., 2014), but our results may not be directly comparable, as we focused on vulnerable youth rather than university students or graduates.

The many benefits brought by internship programs suggest that vulnerable youth should also be the target group of such programs. As vulnerable youth obtain a lower level of education, it is often harder for them to obtain and sustain employment than it is for university students. However, as indicated in the literature (Bittmann & Zorn, 2020; Karunaratne & Perera, 2019; Silva et al., 2016), most internship programs are mainly designed and open to university students or graduates. Although the offer of internship programs to vulnerable youth is considered rare, the results of this study suggest that an internship experience can foster significant personal development, indicated by BEAM elements in vulnerable youth, which greatly assists them in seeking future employment. Some learning goals, such as being punctual, may sound basic, but they are integral to the vulnerable youth who may lack exposure to society. Unlike the internship programs for undergraduate students (Wolinsky-Nahmias & Auerbach, 2022), higher-level training objectives such as enhancing professional competence may not need to be included in the objectives of internships for vulnerable youth. By adjusting the training focus, the internship can also be utilized in assisting this population.

The findings not only indicate that internships are beneficial for vulnerable youth, but also suggest *how* the design of internship programs can effectively make a difference. Three important domains can be identified for an effective internship program. Although these domains are consistent with the literature (Burnett, 2023), they are rarely discussed in the context of supporting vulnerable youth. First, the internship programs should not be too short for this population, because they need time to become acclimated to the work environment. The barriers encountered by vulnerable youth, such as the lack of hard or soft skills, would hamper their initial readiness because it is often not feasible to overcome the many issues in a short time (Hollywood et al., 2012; Newton et al., 2020). A sufficient program time allows this group to adjust to a new environment, make attempts for changes, and acquire the necessary skills and experience that will help them transition into the workforce. As shown in the findings, the trainees were able to handle more challenges or tasks only after they gained the trust of their colleagues. Meaningful relationships with mentors and coworkers also need time to establish.

Second, mentoring support is essential to the success of youth programs (Hossain & Bloom, 2015; Kabacoff et al., 2013; Sanders et al., 2020). Mentors can offer support and guidance tailored for vulnerable youth who may have different and specific needs. This support, which can be emotional or technical, is critical to this group for dealing with the challenges they face in an unfamiliar context. The more interactions with mentors, the more sense of belonging and self-worth vulnerable youth can gain, which in turn enhances their emotive social capital (Spires & Cox, 2016). To maximize the benefits of a mentor-mentee relationship, the role of mentors should be clearly defined, and more training can be provided to mentors who need to handle the different needs of vulnerable youth.

Third, fostering a supportive work environment is also helpful. An environment that includes practical on-the-job training and colleagues who offer acceptance and friendliness can promote the growth of vulnerable youth. As indicated in the findings, youth often need guidance and support from their colleagues, especially during the initial

phase of the internship. The hospitality and accepted attitudes displayed by colleagues can reduce their fear, which in turn encourages them to make attempts and achieve greater development.

The present study has important implications for counseling and career development programs. Vocational service practitioners may consider deploying the intervention of an internship to address the employment challenges faced by vulnerable youth. Breaking the vicious cycle of unemployment for this group is an urgent concern, and implementing an internship program is shown to be a feasible intervention to prevent the perpetuation of the cycle of “no experience, no job; no job, no experience” and to prevent them from becoming “NEET.” Although this study suggests that internship programs can be a new pathway for vulnerable youth, more case studies of such programs are needed to develop a more comprehensive intervention approach.

The program currently evaluated provides internships exclusively in social service units. Although such work experience can be advantageous for vulnerable youth in preparing them for the workforce, it may be even more beneficial for some of them to gain internships in the commercial sector. Therefore, it may be helpful for the service organizers to secure support from local businesses. Moreover, further studies should be conducted to assess the internship program experience specifically within such enterprises.

## 6. Theoretical and practical implications

Although our present study focused on vulnerable youth, our findings align with the those of quantitative studies on internships (Baert et al., 2021; Tsambou et al., 2024), showing that internships can also enhance youth employability. The study leveraged the strengths of the qualitative inquiry approach, and explored *how* internships can support vulnerable youth in enhancing their employability, especially helping them to break the vicious cycle of “no experience, no job; no job, no experience.” The findings also provided empirical evidence for verifying the BEAM model, which may allow us to systematically explore the benefits of internships. There are vulnerable youth across various countries, and this model is likely appropriate for examining the benefits of internships for this population.

The findings seem to suggest a proactive approach should be adopted to further facilitate and promote internships for vulnerable youth. Traditionally, an internship is designed for high school or university students to facilitate their school-to-work transition and offer hands-on experience that allows vulnerable youth to apply their knowledge and skills in a practical setting. Vulnerable youth are usually excluded in those systems that could offer internship opportunities, yet they are the group that requires intensive coaching, guidance, and emotional support to enter the job market.

Hence, the findings seem to suggest that policymakers should offer funding initiatives encouraging employment schemes for supporting vulnerable youth, including those who are still in school. By doing so, they may provide these youth with diverse pathways (Tsambou et al., 2024), as not succeeding in academics does not equate to failure.

Educators can utilize internships in supporting vulnerable youth's career preparation. When schools offer career guidance for these youth, emphasis should be given to the four domains: basic soft skills, expectations toward work, attitude to work, and marketable job skills. Additionally, instead of focusing mainly on theoretical knowledge, educators may offer these youth internship experiences in order to prepare them for the world of work. Educators are well-positioned to identify this population at an early stage. Schools, especially those with a higher population of vulnerable youth, may also consider offering short-term internships (e.g., two to three weeks) to prepare students for longer internships. It is understandable that many educators may have limitations, in terms of time and expertise, in organizing internships. Therefore, schools may develop collaboration with those NGOs that offer internship opportunities for vulnerable youth.

There are also some specific implications for NGOs who operate

internship programs. Our study shows the success of internship programs to facilitate their future employment. Such success requires substantial mentoring support to guide the youth to adjust to and go through the whole internship process. In addition to interviews and assessments to identify areas of interests, it is essential to offer pre-internship preparation programs to help vulnerable youth develop the necessary skills and knowledge. Preparing youth for the internship experience boosts their readiness for the workplace, fostering a good collaboration with the placement organizations. During the internship, the mentor should continuously monitor the progress of the vulnerable youth and gather feedback from both the interns and the employers. It is necessary to regularly assess their performance, skill development, and overall experience to identify areas for improvement and make necessary adjustments. The monitoring and evaluation process helps ensure that the internship program remains effective.

Moreover, such internship programs should be expanded to the commercial sector, and a partnership between NGOs and commercial organizations should be established to provide internship opportunities. While the NGOs are responsible for providing mentoring support, the commercial organizations that offer inclusive and supportive work environments should provide the internship placements. This can further broaden the exposure of the vulnerable youth to various professional environments and help them acquire various kinds of skills. The NGOs can continue to offer workshops and training sessions on workplace etiquette and other relevant skills training. Commercial organizations can provide on-the-job training, mentoring, and ongoing support to help interns succeed in their roles. This combined effort enhances the capacity of vulnerable youth to excel in their internships.

## 7. Limitations of the study

The study has certain limitations. Employability enhancement and employment are related but still two different things. This study focused on examining how internship programs may contribute to the former. Programs for the latter may require further research efforts. Also, the internship program under investigation was implemented by a single NGO. The specific context, resources, and approaches employed by this NGO could have influenced the outcomes and experiences of the interns. However, the specific context, resources, and approaches (involvement of mentoring support) brings forth the success of the program. Also, the present study relied on the self-reports of participants, who were asked to comment on the internship program, and social desirability might have occurred. The limited number of participants could limit the generalizability of the research findings. Likewise, the program being evaluated provided internships exclusively in social service units. These units are usually more accommodating for an inclusive and supportive work environment. While this narrow scope allowed for an in-depth analysis of the internships in this specific field, it limited the examination of internships in other sectors or industries. Further research and studies encompassing a broader range of organizations and industries would be beneficial for a more comprehensive understanding of the effects and limitations of internship programs.

## 8. Conclusion

In order to address the persistent cycle of “no experience, no job; no job, no experience” among vulnerable youth, this qualitative study explored the internship program as a potential solution to address this challenge. Accordingly, the BEAM model may serve as a starting point for conceptualizing the needs of vulnerable youth and how these needs may be addressed by internship programs. The four elements in the BEAM model are regarded as important attributes to enhance employability, but most vulnerable youth lack these qualities. Enhancing the four attributes should be a focus for their future development. As supported by the outcome of this study, internship programs can be an effective measure of the four elements to improve the capabilities of

vulnerable youth. Accordingly, incorporating the BEAM model in internship programs may be an effective direction for vulnerable youth, but further attention should be paid to reviewing and refining conceptual models that can inform the design of internship programs.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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### Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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