



Developing Gen Z Students' Work Readiness: Hard Skills, Soft Skills, and Internships

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Abstrak

*This study is motivated by the increasing demands of the labor market for higher education graduates who not only possess hard skills but also demonstrate strong soft skills and practical experience. However, a gap remains between the competencies acquired by students and the needs of the industry, particularly among Generation Z students. This study aims to analyze the effect of hard skills and soft skills on work readiness, with internship experience serving as an intervening variable among university students in Pekanbaru City. The research employs a quantitative approach using purposive sampling techniques, involving 110 respondents who met the specified criteria. The sample size was determined using G*Power. Data analysis was conducted using Structural Equation Modeling based on Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS). The results indicate that hard skills have a significant effect on internship experience but do not exhibit a strong direct effect on work readiness. In contrast, soft skills significantly influence both internship experience and work readiness. Internship experience is found to have the most dominant effect on work readiness and acts as a significant intervening variable in the relationship between both hard skills and soft skills and work readiness. In conclusion, students' work readiness is not directly formed by the mere possession of skills, but rather through the transformation of competencies that occurs during real work experiences. Therefore, strengthening internship programs becomes a key factor in enhancing students' work readiness..*

Keywords: Hard Skills, Soft Skills, Internship Experience, Work Readiness, Generation Z Students.

1. Introduction

The advancement of globalization and rapid technological development has led to significant changes in the nature of the labor market, demanding a more comprehensive enhancement of human resource quality. Companies no longer rely solely on formal educational attainment as the primary criterion in recruitment processes but increasingly emphasize the importance of technical skill proficiency and practical experience aligned with industry needs. This condition indicates that academic degrees are no longer a guarantee for graduates to secure employment; therefore, individuals are required to possess more adaptive and applicable work readiness [14]. In this context, strategic human resource management through competency development becomes essential to ensure that graduates are able to contribute optimally and to minimize future workforce quality gaps [19]. Furthermore, higher education functions not only as a medium for knowledge transfer but also as a process of character building and the development of adaptive skills necessary to navigate increasingly complex workplace dynamics [13].

The issue of work readiness is further reflected in the persistently high unemployment rate, particularly among graduates of secondary and higher education. Data indicate that vocational high school graduates (SMK) have the highest open unemployment rate at 5.87%, while university graduates also remain at a relatively high level of 5.60% as of February 2025. This condition suggests a mismatch between the competencies possessed by graduates and labor market

demands, resulting in many graduates being unable to be optimally absorbed into the workforce [14]. A similar phenomenon is observed at the regional level, where the unemployment rate in Riau Province increased to approximately 4.12% in 2025, indicating that work readiness remains a relevant issue regionally. This highlights that graduates are not only required to have academic qualifications but also must demonstrate work readiness aligned with industry needs to compete in an increasingly competitive labor market [4].

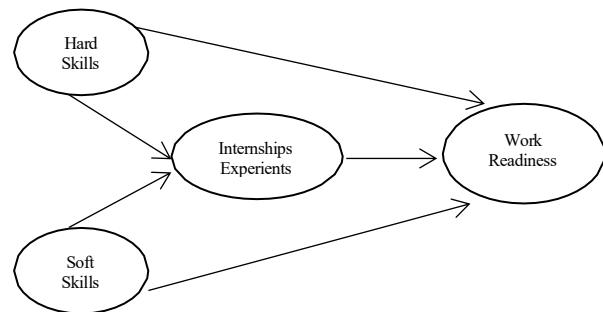
From a theoretical perspective, students' work readiness can be explained through Human Capital Theory, which posits that investment in education, training, and experience enhances an individual's value in the labor market [5]. In this context, the mastery of hard skills and soft skills represents an accumulation of human capital that plays a significant role in improving graduates' productivity and competitiveness. Additionally, Experiential Learning Theory emphasizes that effective learning occurs through direct experience, making internships an important medium for transforming theoretical knowledge into practical competence [9]. Furthermore, the concept of employability explains that work readiness is not solely determined by technical abilities but also by a combination of skills, experience, and personal attributes that enable individuals to adapt to workplace demands [20]. Thus, these perspectives provide a strong conceptual foundation for understanding the relationship between hard skills, soft skills, internship experience, and work readiness.

Work readiness refers to an individual's ability to meet job demands, encompassing knowledge, skills, and experience relevant to industry requirements [12]. In the context of Generation Z students, work readiness is not only determined by academic achievement but also by the balance between hard skills and soft skills. Hard skills, as specific technical competencies such as technological proficiency and analytical ability, form the fundamental basis for performing tasks effectively and meeting established professional standards [24], [10]. However, soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability serve as distinguishing factors that determine an individual's success in integrating into the workplace [1], [11]. In fact, deficiencies in communication and problem-solving skills remain key challenges faced by students in enhancing their work readiness [17]. Therefore, students' work readiness is the result of the integration of technical competencies, interpersonal skills, and practical experience, which collectively enable individuals to navigate the complexities of the modern work environment [15].

Although the mastery of hard skills and soft skills is essential in enhancing work readiness, in practice, these competencies alone do not fully guarantee students' preparedness to face real-world work environments. This is primarily due to the limited practical experience students have in understanding workplace dynamics. Therefore, internship experience serves as a strategic mechanism to bridge the gap between academic theory and real-world practice. Through internship programs, students not only gain direct work experience but also develop problem-solving abilities, understand organizational culture, and build a professional work ethic [16], [6]. Moreover, internship experience enables students to apply the knowledge acquired during their studies to real work situations, thereby strengthening the integration of hard skills and soft skills [18]. Thus, internship experience plays a crucial role as an intervening variable that links students' competencies to their level of work readiness [3].

Several previous studies have examined the influence of hard skills and soft skills on work readiness, demonstrating that both variables significantly contribute to enhancing individuals' ability to enter the workforce [14], [1]. On the other hand, research on internship experience has also confirmed its role in improving students' work readiness by providing practical exposure within professional environments [16], [3]. However, most of these studies have analyzed these variables in isolation or positioned internship experience as a moderating variable, thereby failing to provide a comprehensive understanding of how students' competencies are transformed into work readiness through practical experience [2]. Additionally, studies specifically

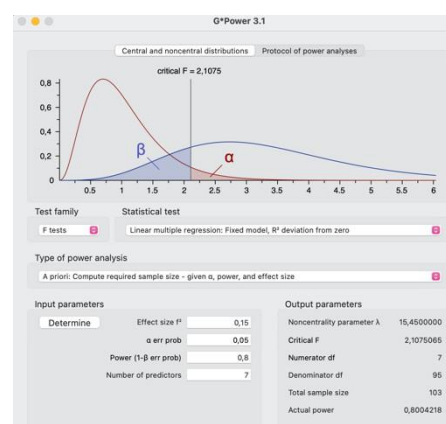
focusing on Generation Z students within a local context, particularly in Pekanbaru City, remain limited. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the effect of hard skills and soft skills on work readiness, with internship experience as an intervening variable among Generation Z students in Pekanbaru City..



Figures 1. Framework

2. Research Metodology

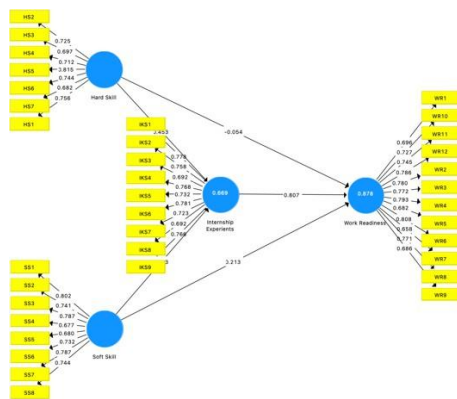
This study employs a quantitative approach using a survey method to analyze the effect of hard skills and soft skills on work readiness, with internship experience as an intervening variable among Generation Z students in Pekanbaru City. The sampling technique applied is purposive sampling, in which respondents are selected based on specific criteria aligned with the research objectives: (1) students classified as Generation Z, (2) having internship experience, and (3) residing in Pekanbaru City. The total sample consists of 110 respondents who meet these criteria. The sample size was determined using G*Power to ensure the adequacy of the sample for statistical analysis. Data were collected through a questionnaire using a Likert scale and subsequently analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling based on Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) to examine both direct and indirect relationships among the variables in the research model. d



Figures 2. G*Power

3. Results and Discussion

Based on the developed conceptual framework, this study examines the relationship between hard skills and soft skills on work readiness, with internship experience as an intervening variable, using Structural Equation Modeling based on Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS). This approach was selected because it is capable of analyzing complex relationships among latent variables and simultaneously testing both direct and indirect effects, particularly in studies with relatively small sample sizes [7]. In addition, SEM-PLS is effective for evaluating predictive models oriented toward theory development, making it suitable for this study's objective of explaining the mechanism underlying students' work readiness through the integration of skills and practical experience [8]. The results of the data analysis are presented in the following structural model.



Gambar 3. Diagram Path PLS Algorithm

Based on the outer model evaluation, all indicators for the variables hard skills, soft skills, internship experience, and work readiness show loading factor values predominantly above 0.70, indicating that they meet the criteria for convergent validity. Although some indicators have loading values below 0.70, these values are still acceptable in exploratory research as long as they do not fall below the minimum threshold of 0.50 [7]. This indicates that the indicators used in this study adequately represent the constructs being measured.

The construct reliability test shows that all variables have Composite Reliability (CR) values above 0.70, indicating good internal consistency of the research instrument. In addition, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for all variables also meet the minimum threshold of 0.50, suggesting that each construct is able to explain more than 50% of the variance of its indicators [7]. Thus, the measurement model in this study demonstrates satisfactory levels of reliability and convergent validity.

On the other hand, the discriminant validity test shows that each construct has higher loading values on its own indicators compared to other constructs, indicating that each variable has a strong ability to distinguish itself from other constructs in the model [8]. This further confirms that there is no multicollinearity issue among the constructs. Therefore, the measurement model is considered appropriate for further analysis in the structural model (inner model).

Table 1. R-Square

	R Square	R Square Adjusted
Internship Experiences	0.669	0.663
Work Readiness	0.878	0.874

Based on the inner model evaluation, the coefficient of determination (R-square) indicates that the internship experience variable has a value of 0.669, while work readiness has a value of 0.878. These results indicate that 66.9% of the variation in internship experience can be explained by hard skills and soft skills, while the remaining 33.1% is influenced by other variables outside the research model. Meanwhile, the R-square value of 0.878 for work readiness indicates that 87.8% of the variation in work readiness can be explained simultaneously by hard skills, soft skills, and internship experience. Referring to the evaluation criteria in SEM-PLS, an R-square value of 0.75 is considered substantial, 0.50 moderate, and 0.25 weak [7]. Therefore, the R-square value of 0.669 for internship experience falls within the moderate-to-substantial category, while the value of 0.878 for work readiness is classified as very strong. This demonstrates that the research model has high predictive power in explaining the endogenous variables, particularly students' work readiness. In addition, the adjusted R-square values of 0.663 for internship experience and 0.874 for work readiness indicate that the model remains stable after adjusting for the number of variables and sample size. The relatively small difference between R-square and adjusted R-square suggests that the model does not suffer from overfitting and has a good level of generalizability.

Table 2. Hypotesis Testing

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (O/STDEV)	P Values
Hard Skill > Internship Experiences	0.453	0.457	0.098	4.644	0.000
Hard Skill > Work Readiness	0.054	0.055	0.063	0.854	0.003

Soft Skill - > Internship Experiences	0.413	0.414	0.105	3.918	0.000
Soft Skill - > Work Readiness	0.213	0.222	0.070	3.030	0.003
Internship Experiences -> Work Readiness	0.807	0.800	0.063	12.837	0.000
Hard Skill > Internship Experiences -> Work Readiness	0.366	0.365	0.081	4.521	0.000
Soft Skill - > Internship Experiences -> Work Readiness	0.333	0.331	0.086	3.854	0.000

The results show that hard skills have a positive and significant effect on internship experience, with a coefficient value (β) of 0.453, T-statistics of 4.644 (>1.96), and a p-value of 0.000 (<0.05). This indicates that an increase in students' technical skills is significantly followed by an improvement in the quality of their internship experience. Statistically, this effect is considered moderate, suggesting that hard skills are an important determinant, although not the only factor influencing internship experience. Theoretically, this finding aligns with Human Capital Theory, which explains that technical skills as an investment in education enhance individuals' opportunities to obtain relevant work experience [5]. Research by [14] also supports that students with strong hard skills tend to be more prepared and more easily absorbed into internship programs. However, when tested directly on work readiness, hard skills show a very small coefficient ($\beta = 0.054$) with a T-statistics value of 0.854 (<1.96). Although the p-value is reported as 0.003, the low T-statistics indicates that the effect is not statistically strong enough to explain variations in work readiness. This suggests that hard skills are not a dominant factor in directly shaping work readiness. Conceptually, this finding is consistent with the employability approach, which states that work readiness is a multidimensional construct and does not rely solely on technical abilities [20]. Study [1] also emphasizes that hard skills without practical experience and soft skills tend to have limited impact on students' work readiness.

On the other hand, soft skills have a positive and significant effect on internship experience, with a coefficient value (β) of 0.413, T-statistics of 3.918 (>1.96), and a p-value of 0.000. Statistically, this indicates that interpersonal skills contribute considerably to the quality of students' internship experience. This can be understood because the work environment requires high levels of interaction,

communication, and adaptability. This finding is supported by Syahrini [17], who states that soft skills play a role in improving students' effectiveness during work experience. Furthermore, soft skills also have a significant effect on work readiness, with a coefficient value (β) of 0.213, T-statistics of 3.030 (>1.96), and a p-value of 0.003. Although the coefficient is smaller compared to internship experience, this result indicates that soft skills still make a meaningful contribution to improving students' work readiness. Statistically, the effect is categorized as weak to moderate but remains significant. This suggests that interpersonal abilities such as communication and adaptability are important supporting factors in facing workplace demands. This finding is consistent with [11], which states that soft skills enhance individuals' adaptability and contribute to work readiness.

Moreover, internship experience shows the most dominant effect on work readiness, with a coefficient value (β) of 0.807, T-statistics of 12.837, and a p-value of 0.000. This high coefficient indicates a very strong relationship, meaning that internship experience is the primary factor explaining students' work readiness. The very high T-statistics value demonstrates a highly significant effect. This indicates that practical experience plays a central role in transforming knowledge and skills into real work competencies. This finding is consistent with Experiential Learning Theory, which emphasizes that experiential learning is the most effective method for developing competence [9], and is also supported by Simanungkalit [16], who found that internship experience significantly influences students' work readiness. In terms of indirect effects, the results show that internship experience mediates the effect of hard skills on work readiness, with a coefficient value of 0.366, T-statistics of 4.521 (>1.96), and a p-value of 0.000. Statistically, this indicates a significant mediating effect that strengthens the relationship between hard skills and work readiness. This means that hard skills are more effective in improving work readiness when implemented through practical experience. This finding is supported by [18], which states that internship programs can transform technical skills into applicable work competencies.

A similar pattern is observed in the indirect effect of soft skills on work readiness through internship experience, with a coefficient value of 0.333, T-statistics of 3.854 (>1.96), and a p-value of 0.000. This indicates that internship experience also plays a significant mediating role in strengthening the contribution of soft skills to work readiness. Statistically, this effect is considered moderate, suggesting that soft skills not only have a direct impact but are also strengthened through real work experience. This finding aligns with [3], which states that

internship experience reinforces the relationship between soft skills and students' work readiness.

4. Conclusion

This study reveals that the formation mechanism of students' work readiness does not occur directly through the acquisition of skills, but rather through a gradual and integrated process. This is reflected in the differences in the strength of relationships among variables, where hard skills have a relatively strong effect on internship experience ($\beta = 0.453$), yet contribute almost no direct effect on work readiness ($\beta = 0.054$). This pattern indicates that technical skills do not possess functional value unless they are applied and tested within real work contexts. In contrast, soft skills demonstrate a more consistent role, influencing both internship experience ($\beta = 0.413$) and work readiness directly ($\beta = 0.213$). Although the magnitude of their contribution is not dominant, soft skills represent the only variable that remains relevant both before and after students engage in work experience. This suggests that interpersonal and adaptive abilities function as an initial "bridging element" in the transition from the academic environment to the workplace.

However, the critical point in this model lies in internship experience as the most influential variable on work readiness ($\beta = 0.807$). This strong effect, combined with the significant indirect effects of hard skills ($\beta = 0.366$) and soft skills ($\beta = 0.333$), confirms that internship experience is not merely an additional variable but a central mechanism that activates the full potential of students' competencies. In other words, without internship experience, both hard skills and soft skills are unlikely to achieve their full effectiveness in shaping work readiness. Therefore, the main contribution of this study lies in emphasizing that the work readiness of Generation Z students in Pekanbaru City is more strongly shaped by a process of competency transformation through experience rather than by the mere possession of competencies. The model demonstrates that skills only become meaningful when contextualized in real work practice, positioning internship experience as a "conversion space" that transforms potential skills into actual readiness.

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