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Discovering the tutors' perspective on the quality of internship programs in a pandemic context

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Abstract. *Digitalization of educational activities has emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic in all dimensions of the education system, including the higher education institutions. These were forced to adapt their teaching and research activities to an online format, as physical interactions were restricted in the Romanian case for two years (March 2020-March 2022). Internships are a strong tool for developing students' competences, and they also faced the challenges of forced digitalization. This paper investigates the quality of the internship programs delivered in a digital format during a pandemic context, as perceived by the tutors from academic environment. Using an online distributed questionnaire, data collection was conducted in the first months of 2022 and resulted in a sample of 60 respondents, all academics from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. The analysis uses a mix of quantitative (statistical) and qualitative methods, making use of various visual representation tools. Principal component analysis (PCA) is also conducted in order to identify the main factors influencing the quality of internship programs from tutors' perspective. The five factors that resulted from the PCA are: knowledge transfer, collaborative activity, personal development, administrative environment, and student evaluation. The results show that most of the interrogated academics have a favorable opinion regarding the effectiveness of the internship programs in a pandemic context. They appreciate that most of the companies have the facilities for delivering internship programs in a hybrid or online format. Also, these programs are increasing students' competencies and self-confidence. However, tutors are more reluctant towards the personal development of students in a hybrid or full online format of the internship.*

Keywords: Internships, skills, higher education, academic, business environment, Romania.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered and fostered the transformation of education, including higher education, in all its aspects. The teaching, research, and mentoring activities in universities were adapted to the new online format. Internships do not represent an exception, and they had to cope with the challenges of forced digitization to achieve their major goal of developing students' skills and enhancing their integration in the labor market. This paper investigates the quality of the internship programs delivered during a pandemic context, as perceived by the tutors from academic environment in Romania.

Various definitions of what an internship means have been provided by the scientific literature. Zopiatis (2007) defined internships as short-term practical work experiences that help students understand a specific field or career area. In the present paper under the term "internship", the authors understand the professional preparation of students in a real-life context, conducted in a certain organization in an online, offline or hybrid format for a limited period of time. The main purpose of internships is to offer students the practical opportunity to develop various skills, to connect theory with practice, and develop a true understanding of the working conditions in the business environment. Internships facilitate a better understanding of a certain profession and offer students the opportunity to explore future possibilities of working conditions in a certain profession (Dima and Vasilache, 2009; Parveen & Mirza, 2012; Dima and Vasilache, 2016). Internships provide opportunities related to the application of knowledge (Beggs et al., 2008). According to Cord et al. (2010, p. 47), internships represent structured experiential learning programs which "provide students with the practical opportunity to apply their knowledge in an industry context and also to reflect on their personal learning journey".

In the scientific literature, the concepts "mentor" and "tutor" often have very similar meanings, being used therefore as interchangeable terms. In the context of the current research, the mentor is an employee of the organization where the internship is conducted, who is assigned to guide and support the student during the internship. The tutor is the academic supervisor from the university and according to the methodologies of internships existing in The Bucharest University of Economic Studies her/ his main role is to plan, organize and supervise the practical learning and the achievement of practical skills together with the mentors and representatives of the organizations. Due to the very limited time allocated for these tasks, the role of the university tutor focuses often mainly on administrative issues and students' assessment and evaluation after the internship. This approach of the terminology is in line with other research conducted by Carnwell et al. (2007) in which the managers 'perception is that the mentors' primary role is practical, supporting and encouraging students in practice, while the tutors' primary role is academic and have the responsibility to assists students and update mentors on the education and learning outcomes of students.

In the context of economics and business higher education, three actors are considered crucial for the success of the internship: students, tutors, and the companies (Miron et al., 2010). Most of the papers focus on students' perspective, as they are the beneficiaries of the internship program and its success depends on outcomes such as: the development of new skills or increasing employability. The role of the companies is recently being more and more investigated. This scientific interest is derived particularly from the proven links between educational programs offered and the economic success of companies, including their profitability (Samoliuk et al., 2021; Urbancová and Vrabcová, 2020). Covrig et al. (2022) demonstrated that in Romania the business environment has a favorable opinion regarding the internship programs, and their added value is clearly acknowledged by all stakeholders. Internships are considered to play an additional role in the practical learning process, besides other teaching methods in business education. Farashahi and Tajeddin (2018) made a comparison study on the learning outcomes of lectures, case studies, and simulations. Their conclusions state that simulations are perceived by students as the most effective methods in developing interpersonal skills and self-awareness, while case studies and simulations develop problem solving skills and are more effective than lectures. The simulations are allowing the students to be involved into business and make decisions that can affect the outcomes. Through case studies, students can develop alternative solutions and be exposed to different business contexts. Internships provide opportunities for students to practice and test their acquired skills in a professional environment, offering them insights into the working world, managing themselves, the work, and the relationships with other colleagues (Cheong et al., 2014; Knouse & Fontenot, 2008). As the internships involve a real business environment, performing different tasks and taking responsibility, their relevance to students' professional development is remarkable.

Tutors' perspective, involvement, and roles in the internship programs benefit from a variable coverage, depending on the field of education: many studies address the case of mentoring and tutoring in education at undergraduate level (Williams et al., 2004), but to a lower extent papers are referring to economics and business higher education. A systematic review on the effects of business internships on students, employers, and higher education institutions conducted by Sanahuja Vélez and Ribes Giner (2015) concluded that internships are a win – win situation for the three stakeholders, identifying a wide variety of benefits like: improving chances of employment, enhancing job and social skills, clarifying career paths, reducing recruitment costs, enhancing the reputation and visibility of higher education institutions or providing input for curricular assessment. The findings of Binder et al. (2015) or Nemteanu et al. (2021) also state that internships have fundamental effect on subsequent academic outcomes, for both advantaged and disadvantaged students.

This paper attempts to provide new perspectives on internships, by considering the opinions of tutors and other academic supervisors. We analyze the case of internship programs delivered to students in The Bucharest University of Economics Studies, the largest in Romania with more than 20000 students enrolled in the academic year 2021-2022, and one of the most prestigious universities of economics and business in Eastern Europe.

The purpose of the paper is twofold: (i) to investigate tutors' perspective on the internship, and (ii) to identify and explain their preference for working in online or hybrid internships, against the ones in physical format.

Using an online distributed questionnaire, data collection was conducted within the project "Practice smart your development - PRIDE-U" and resulted in a sample of 60

respondents, all academics from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. The current analysis uses quantitative (statistical) methods, relying on descriptive statistics, correlation, and principal component analysis (PCA), suitable for identifying the most relevant dimensions of the quality of the internships. For a better understanding and explaining the preferences for a certain internship program, we also employ a qualitative analysis. We benefit from the open-ended questions on the positive and negative issues associated with the internships.

The novelty of the paper relies on the following: we provide the perspective of the tutors from the economics and business administration faculties, less covered in the academic literature; we also considered the (unapproached) case of the internship programs developed during the COVID-19 pandemic; moreover, we employ a mixed methodology, using both quantitative and qualitative techniques; finally, we use primary data collected from 60 respondents from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, bringing to light the Romanian case of the internship programs.

Literature review

Mentoring and tutoring are crucial activities that influence the quality of an internship in various ways, as mentors and tutors should respond to the needs of the learner in professional or, in some cases, even in personal issues. Researchers have addressed the activities performed by a mentor in various fields. Millwater and Yarrow (1997) identified a series of tasks that a mentor should fulfill: assisting the learners in their activities with advises, increasing the learners' knowledge by "taking the learner from where they were and developing the person from there". Also, the mentor should develop a connection with the learner and should earn the trust and respect of the student. The mentors should also engage in working collaboratively with the learners. They must be dynamic and creative in their teaching and should encourage the innovation and creativity of their students as well.

Therefore, the role of mentoring and tutoring is recognized by other actors involved in the internships, namely students and business partners. Herman et al. (2021) or Machová et al. (2021) show the critical role of the tutors in the success of the internship program. They highlight the relevance given by students and companies to tutors and mentors who contribute to the development of the practical skills.

In the pandemic context, the mentoring and tutoring activities faced the challenge of forced digitalization. However, online internships were already well-established prior to the pandemic. Armellini et al. (2021) analyzed student's perspectives on learning experiences in a higher education active blended learning context. Findings suggest that tutors play a key role in the quality learning experiences and overall, in a quality student's experience. The authors highlight the relevance of a collaborative approach to promote learner engagement and a sense of belonging. Students value the interaction with peers, tutors, and content, enabled by sound pedagogic design and the appropriate deployment of digital technologies.

Jeske and Axtel (2014) discuss the emergence of a new form of internship (virtual or e-internships), which poses particular challenges for the interns, the supervisors, and organizations alike. The authors present results regarding the prevalence and characteristics of e-internships, including a brief e-internship description. Several similarities between e-internships and traditional internships are identified. For instance, both types of internships represent a way for students to develop their professional perspective and influence their future career decision. On the other hand, a difference arises in terms of communication

practices between traditional internships and e-internships. The nature of e-internships means that almost all contact will be largely computer-mediated rather than face-to-face. This has implications for the social relationship between e-interns and their immediate supervisor, peers, and the organization overall. Although the newer generations are strongly accustomed to communicating online, the understanding of some tasks and responsibilities involved by the internship program can be affected (Dvorský et al., 2021).

Vriens et al. (2013) use the term "e-coaching" as an integrative concept that covers all related terms like e-mentoring, e-tutoring, or virtual support. In its approach, e-coaching is "coaching from a distance with the help of technology". Coaching has a larger coverage on exchange of information, training, or instruction, giving feedback. The authors demonstrate that providing feedback is a crucial function in a student–tutor interaction, but it can also be the most complicated, as it should be consistent with the feedback given by the business monitor. Therefore, the university tutor should be in permanent contact with the mentor from the organization while guiding, supporting, and evaluating the students.

Examining the conditions for successful communication in e-internships is also important. Gaskell (2012) reported that within a university context, the frequency of the interactions initiated by tutors during distance learning made a significant difference to student's performance, with those students who were contacted at critical points having a much higher passing rate.

In the Romanian context of higher education in economics and business, deploying the online or hybrid internships was not the standard approach, and the face-to-face format was generally implemented. Therefore, the evidence on e-internship in the Romanian case is quite limited, and the paper aims at filling this gap, as most of the internships have been conducted online and/ or hybrid in the last two years, and the results of the present study refer to these internships.

Methodology

Research setting and hypotheses

Within the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, the internship represents a compulsory subject for both Bachelor's and Master's programs. The internship is scheduled in both cases in the second year of study. According to the Methodology of the University for the Internship Programs (2022a, 2022b) and after analyzing the curricula of various study programs, the subject called "Internship" receives for the Bachelor's programs at least 3 ECTS and it covers at least 84 hours, while for the Master's programs it receives at least 10 ECTS and it covers 280 hours (basically a large part of the last semester of studies). Both undergraduate and graduate students must submit an internship portfolio (containing various details and documents related to the internship) and are evaluated within an (oral) exam by a commission consisting of at least two professors.

Each student who takes an internship has a mentor in the organization and a tutor/ academic supervisor from the teaching staff of the university. Their role is both to guide and support the intern during the internship to maximize the learning outcome and to evaluate her/ his behavior and performance during the internship program.

The purpose of the paper is twofold: (i) to investigate the tutor's perspective on the quality of the internship, and (ii) to identify and explain their preference for working in online or hybrid internships, against the ones in physical format.

We aim to test the following research hypotheses:

H1: The perceived quality of the internship programs has multiple dimensions, covering knowledge transfer, internship framework, and administrative procedures.

H2: The perceived quality may be associated with the tutors' preference for online or hybrid format, versus traditional internship in physical format.

The number of e-internships is rising and their popularity across Romanian students increases every year, as technology and office applications facilitate the virtual office and interactive collaborations. In the pandemic context, in particular, e-internships were rising fast across the world. Therefore, the research objectives are highly relevant for the current developments in the field of economics and business education.

Data collection and methods

In order to grasp and outline the opinion of the representatives of the academic environment about the main elements which might lead to a quality internship, an online questionnaire has been developed. Data collection was conducted within the project "Practice smart your development - PRIDE-U", which is co-financed by the European Union through the Operational Program Human Capital 2014-2020, Priority Axis no. 6 "Education and skills". One of the goals of the project consists in inquiring and highlighting the factors that determine the quality of internships. The approach is holistic, aiming at delivering the perspective of the main stakeholders involved in the process, namely students, organizations, and the academic environment. The triangulation performed through this multifaceted approach enhances the credibility and validity of the research findings resulting from the parallel studies conducted among students, host companies, and academia. The present paper depicts the outcome of the research conducted among professors from the university.

The items of the questionnaire are developed by the authors based on literature research (Anjum, 2020; Chance, 1991; Franco et al., 2019; Maharani, 2018; Odlin et al., 2022; To & Lung, 2020), focus groups conducted with experts in the field and results adapted from previous research. Most of the questions in the questionnaire are closed-ended, either single-choice, multiple-choice, or Likert-type on a scale of 1 to 5. There are also some open-ended questions that seek, on the one hand, to identify the subjects taught by the responding professors and, on the other hand to assess the positive and negative aspects of the professors' experience in the context of internships, as well as suggestions for improvement given the experience gained.

The questionnaire addressed to the academic personnel was distributed online, using Google forms, and the data was collected between January and April 2022 from 60 professors from The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, who held various positions in relation to interns: tutors, internship coordinators, members of European projects in which internships were organized, evaluators of internships, etc. The sampling technique employed was convenience sampling, as the respondents were self-selected from the teaching staff of the university. To maximize the response rate, the link to the questionnaire was sent by email, both by the representatives of the university management team and directly by some of the project team members to their department colleagues.

We use a mixed methodology for analyzing the data. Quantitative data analysis implied a descriptive part, in which the responses are analyzed using mainly frequency analysis, followed by a correlation and Principal Component Analysis (PCA) and nonparametric tests. Analysis was performed in Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS 20 and figures were produced in the same software programs and in R (R Core Team, 2014) using the R

package corrplot() (Wei & Simko, 2021). Finally, open-ended questions were analyzed from a qualitative perspective; the results were visually described using word clouds, where the most relevant concepts are displayed in larger fonts.

Findings and discussions

We firstly provide a brief description of the sample, consisting of 60 respondents. As resulting from the descriptive statistics, the gender distribution of respondents is balanced: 45% of respondents are men and the remaining 55% are women. In terms of age distribution, most respondents (over 43.3%) are aged between 41 and 50. A quarter are aged between 31 and 40, and 18.3% between 51 and 60. The remaining 13.3% are either under 30 or over 60. 40% of respondents are senior lecturers, 35% university professors, 16.67% lecturers, and 8.33% assistant professors. This demographic profile of the respondents indicates a certain level of professional maturity, which implicitly leads to the assumption that the answers provided have a high degree of relevance.

As for the subjects taught by our respondents, they cover a wide range: from entrepreneurship to marketing, finance, economics, law, econometrics, economic informatics, business management, accounting, etc. Thus, practically all the thematic areas studied in a business and economics university are represented.

Next, the main features of the internships and their quality are outlined. The quantitative analysis of the respondents' answers to the 28 items (formulated on a Likert scale 1-5) referring to various aspects of quality of the internships was carried out in three stages:

i. Correlation analysis is firstly used for understanding the relationships between the items.
ii. PCA is applied as a dimension reduction method, keeping as much as possible of the variability of the initial data set.
iii. Nonparametric tests are employed on the identified factors, for explaining the association with the format of the program (online and/ or hybrid versus traditional).

Correlation analysis involves the calculation of Spearman and Kendall rank correlation coefficients, adequate as the variables are measured on an ordinal scale(see Vavrek & Kovářová, 2021). In Figure 1 we present the Spearman correlation coefficients in a synthetic way, using a heat-map diagram. The rank correlation coefficients take values only between -1 and 1, as displayed in the right end of Figure 1: the codes of colors mean that shades of blue correspond to positive correlations, while shades of red correspond to negative correlations. As for the intensity of the correlation, the more intense the correlation is, the more intense the color is. In Figure 1 we notice only blue shades, meaning that all variables are positively correlated, there are pairs of variables with correlation coefficients between 0.6 and 0.8, suggesting correlations of moderate to strong intensity. Statistical inference on the statistical significance of the Spearman coefficient proved that only very few items are significantly correlated at the 5% significance level.

We also notice that some items tend to correlate more with each other, and therefore, we further investigate whether a method of dimension reduction is efficiently applicable.

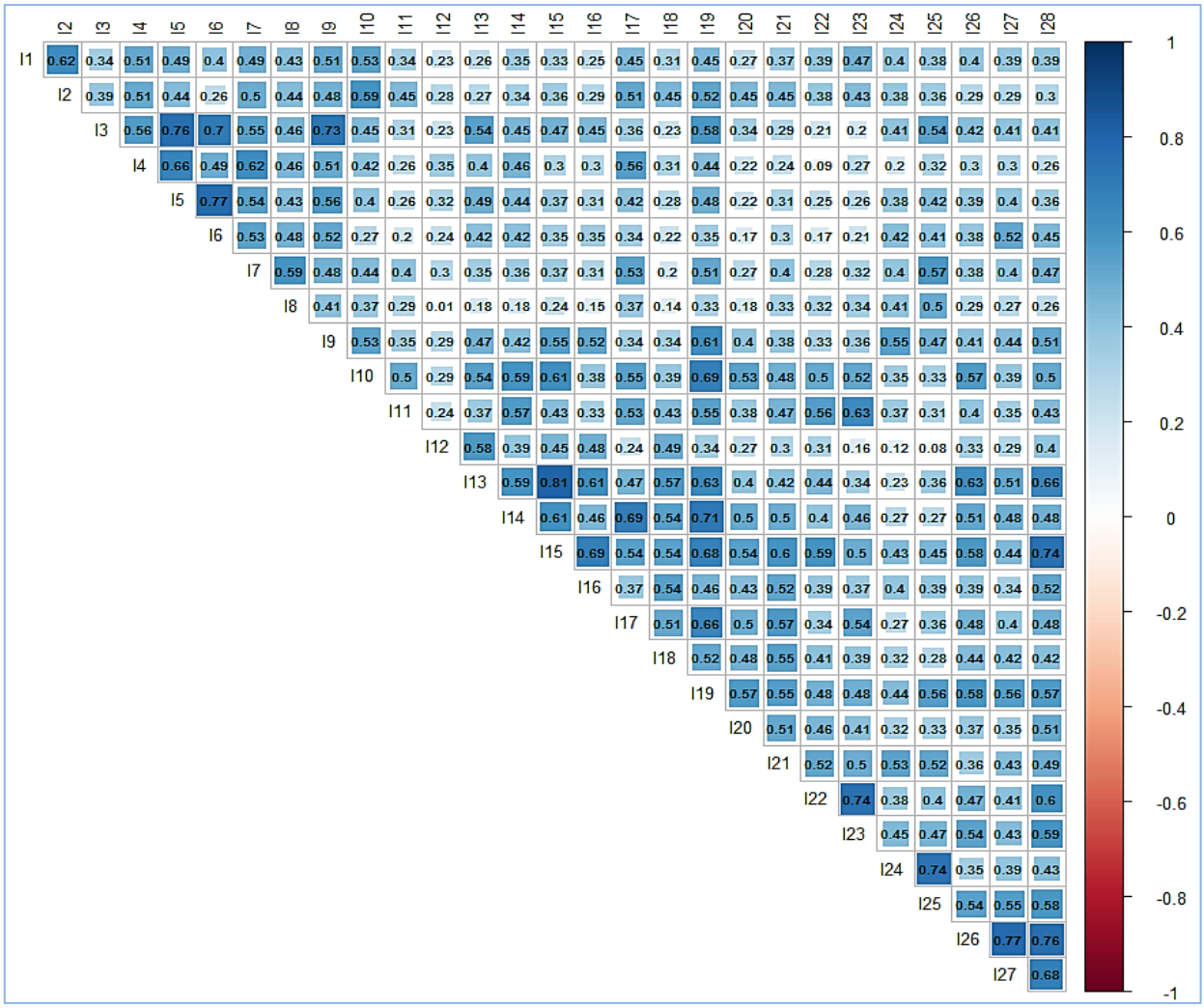


Figure 1. Items related to the quality of internships

Source: Own illustration based on data from the survey.

In order to investigate whether the data set is suitable for the application of a dimension reduction method, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy is calculated and, using the Bartlett test, it is tested whether the correlation matrix of the items differs significantly from the unit matrix. As the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy is 0.846, higher than the threshold of 0.7 recommended in the literature, we conclude that we can apply a dimension reduction method. Also, the calculated Bartlett sphericity test value is 1332.918, with a calculated p-value significance level much lower than the 0.05 significance level.

For identifying the dimensions explaining the perceived quality of the internships, we apply to the data set the Principal Component Analysis. Table 1 shows the eigenvalues of the correlation matrix, the proportion of the total variability explained by each principal component, and the cumulative proportion.

Table 1. Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	12.746	45.520	45.520	12.746	45.520	45.520	5.236	18.701	18.701
2	2.515	8.982	54.502	2.515	8.982	54.502	4.701	16.788	35.489
3	1.898	6.780	61.282	1.898	6.780	61.282	3.751	13.396	48.886
4	1.514	5.407	66.690	1.514	5.407	66.690	3.505	12.519	61.405
5	1.263	4.510	71.199	1.263	4.510	71.199	2.742	9.795	71.199
6	.962	3.437	74.636						
7	.837	2.990	77.626						
8	.812	2.898	80.524						
9	.758	2.706	83.231						
10	.531	1.897	85.127						
11	.514	1.836	86.964						
12	.463	1.653	88.617						
13	.441	1.576	90.193						
14	.391	1.395	91.588						
15	.335	1.195	92.783						
16	.331	1.183	93.966						
17	.268	.956	94.922						
18	.237	.847	95.769						
19	.203	.725	96.494						
20	.197	.705	97.199						
21	.178	.636	97.835						
22	.143	.512	98.347						
23	.116	.415	98.761						
24	.094	.336	99.097						
25	.088	.313	99.410						
26	.064	.227	99.637						
27	.057	.202	99.839						
28	.045	.161	100.000						

Source: Own illustration based on data from the survey.

We retain a number of 5 principal components explaining 71.199% of the total variability of the dataset. Table 2 shows the linear correlation coefficients between the initial items I1 - I28 and the 5 principal components, denoted PC1-PC5, coefficients obtained after applying a Varimax rotation.

Table 2. Rotated Component Matrix –Principal Component Analysis

Items	Component				
	PC1	PC2	PC3	PC4	PC5
I4_Students apply the knowledge acquired in college	**.841**	.204	-.012	.176	.056
I5_Students gain valuable practical knowledge helping them improve academic results	**.807**	.068	.150	.219	.316
I3_Students discover their skills after the internship	**.760**	.048	.243	.305	.254
I6_Students acquire useful knowledge in the future profession	**.664**	-.121	.338	.162	.381
I1_Strong connection between study field and internship	**.608**	.286	.242	.024	.020
I9_Internships increase student employability	**.607**	.089	.542	.307	.127
I7_Students become aware of the usefulness of the knowledge acquired in college	**.603**	.297	.417	.063	.061
I2_Correlation knowledge acquired in university and practical aspects in field of work	**.527**	.436	.376	.147	-.165
I11_Simple administrative aspects in the university regarding the internship	.088	**.736**	.164	.042	.207
I23_Relevant, useful documents requested by university for internship evaluation	-.010	**.666**	.366	-.009	.378

Items	Component				
	PC1	PC2	PC3	PC4	PC5
I17_Student activities established according to the university-company collaboration	.479	**.658**	.108	.177	.054
I14_University receives useful feedback on the content of the university curriculum	.380	**.629**	-.180	.371	.287
I10_The organization of the internships in companies is well established	.442	**.626**	.109	.221	.154
I20_Organization of internships is stimulated by legislation	.080	**.611**	.214	.364	.047
I19_Internships are monitored by university representatives	.440	**.589**	.134	.303	.242
I22_Internships have the optimal duration	-.127	**.538**	.428	.306	.265
I8_Students become familiar with the organizational environment	.430	.160	**.702**	-.075	.043
I24_Internship adds value to the knowledge acquired in the university	.294	.179	**.702**	.099	.215
I25_Internship helps students increase their self-confidence	.242	.187	**.677**	.061	.438
I21_Internship participation is stimulated by the university management	.104	.468	**.585**	.265	.010
I12_Preference over organizing the practice in online or hybrid format	.239	.084	-.107	**.768**	.028
I13_Companies have a greater openness to organize internships	.292	.265	.045	**.734**	.365
I16_Achieving a long-term university-company partnership	.218	.090	.517	**.658**	.094
I15_Intensification of the university-organization relationship for organizing internships	.175	.420	.351	**.653**	.252
I18_University finds easy and offers students internships	.069	.420	.172	**.568**	.147
I27_Students show very good preparation for the internship exam	.210	.212	.134	.148	**.782**
I26_Quality of the internship project is better for most students	.224	.364	.152	.237	**.756**
I28_Overall, the quality of internships has improved in recent years	.161	.356	.403	.412	**.552**

Source: Own illustration based on data from the survey.

The values in Table 2 show with which of the initial items the newly created components correlate more strongly. The initial items have been reordered so that we can better highlight, vertically, those correlation coefficients that suggest a stronger relationship for each principal component, which is useful in interpreting the principal components. Based on the underlying items, the following principal components were defined: PC1 - knowledge transfer, PC2 - administrative environment, PC3 - personal development, PC4 - collaborative activity, and PC5 - student evaluation.

Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each of the five resulting factors: the minimum value is 0.824 for the third factor, and the maximum is 0.914 for the first factor. As all are higher than 0.7, the acceptable level recommended in the literature, we conclude that for all five identified factors, the items employed ensure a high internal consistency of the scale. Moreover, exploratory factor analysis was also applied as a robustness check for our results. The grouping of the items with the highest correlation with the retained five factors is the same as in the PCA.

The results of the PCA show that in professors' perceptions, there are five dimensions that could influence the quality of internships performed by students. The first of these dimensions concerns *the knowledge* acquired by students during their studies and how they are applied during the internship, also ensuring an increase in the chances of employability. According to this dimension, the survey items show that professors appreciate that the quality of internships results from a series of student actions aimed at applying faculty

knowledge in the internship, correlating faculty knowledge with practical aspects of work, and acquiring new knowledge, practical skills, and competencies useful for the future profession, thus increasing their employability. These results are consistent with other studies that show that an internship can improve the employability of students and prepare them for the development of their own careers (To & Lung, 2020; Callanan & Benzing, 2004; Coco, 2000; Odlin et al., 2022; Hora et al., 2019; Teng et al., 2022; Papík et al., 2022; McHugh, 2017),
allows students to apply theoretical learning in practice before becoming graduates (Vélez & Giner, 2015; Coco, 2000; Franco et al., 2019) and helps students to acquire knowledge and skills relevant to a future job (Garavan & Murphy, 2001; Chen et al., 2011; Maharani, 2018; Cho, 2006).

The second dimension that could reflect the quality of internships taken by business and management students refers to the *administrative aspect*s of organizing internships. In the category of administrative elements that have an impact on the quality of internships, the survey focused on issues such as: relevance and usefulness of documents requested by university for the evaluation of internships, efficient organization and according to the legislation of the internship, monitoring of internships by university tutors, efficiency of the duration of internships, the possibility to improve the university curriculum following the feedback received from the internship, etc. A similar study (Franco et al., 2019) measures the dimension of "organization of the internships" through the clarity of the internship objectives, the efficient organization of the internship program, the use of an appropriate evaluation model, etc. Thus, it is observed that the perception of the tutors regarding the quality of the internships carried out by the students supports the results of other studies which show that the organization of internships must comply with a set of rules and regulations established by the university, requiring a well-established procedure to efficiently assess the quality of internships conducted by students (Chance, 1991). Moreover, effective internships are those that have an optimal duration and give students enough time to share experiences and take advantage of the opportunity to develop continuous skills and knowledge (Chance, 1991). The same study highlights that it is important to prepare documents that allow the reporting of what happened at the practice place during the internships in order to be able to evaluate at the end of the internship what the students learned (Chance, 1991).

The third dimension brings the perspective of *student benefits*, this time in terms of what students can develop by participating in internships, especially issues related to personal development. Items specific to this dimension refer to the familiarization of students with the organizational environment, bringing added value and increasing students' self-confidence through internships, stimulating student participation in internships by the university. In this respect, other studies reflect that internship programs help students make connections between academic studies and the business world (Hergert, 2009; Maharani, 2018), better preparing them to start their careers (Hite & Bellizzi, 1986; Liu, 2021; Teng et al., 2022) and have an impact on the professional development and skills of business students, affecting their personal development (Anjum, 2020). On the other hand, research shows that there are positive relationships between students' satisfaction with the internship and their confidence in their own ability to get a full-time job and the usefulness of internships for their future careers (Gupta et al., 2010). At the same time, the research reflects the fact that students who have completed an internship report several positive

changes in their feelings of personal effectiveness, with a greater sense of responsibility and career development (Hite & Bellizzi, 1986; Brooks et al., 1995).

The fourth dimension determining the quality of student's internships, according to professors' perception, is the one associated with *university-organization collaboration* and the interest, openness, or receptivity of companies in organizing internships. In this category, the survey focused on items which refer to the partnership between companies and universities, the opening of companies to the organization of internships, and the involvement of universities in offering internships to students. Thus, the internships have the benefit of connecting the academy with the community, an aspect also discovered by other studies (Odlin et al., 2022). Also, other studies show that partnerships between universities and organizations regarding the organization of internships for students offer increased mutual benefits through the exchange of knowledge and innovation; internships offered through this type of partnerships having a crucial role in integrating students into the labor market (Franco et al., 2019).

According to the professors, the fifth dimension, which could influence the quality of the internships carried out by the students, refers to the *evaluation of the students* after the completion of the internship. Thus, the survey shows that professors appreciate that several issues aimed at the final assessment of students, such as the quality of the elaboration of the documents necessary to evaluate the quality of the internships, and the degree of preparation of students for the evaluation help to increase the quality of internships overall.

The first research hypothesis H1 is therefore confirmed, as indeed the quality of the internships, as perceived by tutors has five dimensions: knowledge transfer, administrative environment, personal development, collaborative activity, and student evaluation. These dimensions are presented in a synthetic way in Figure 2.

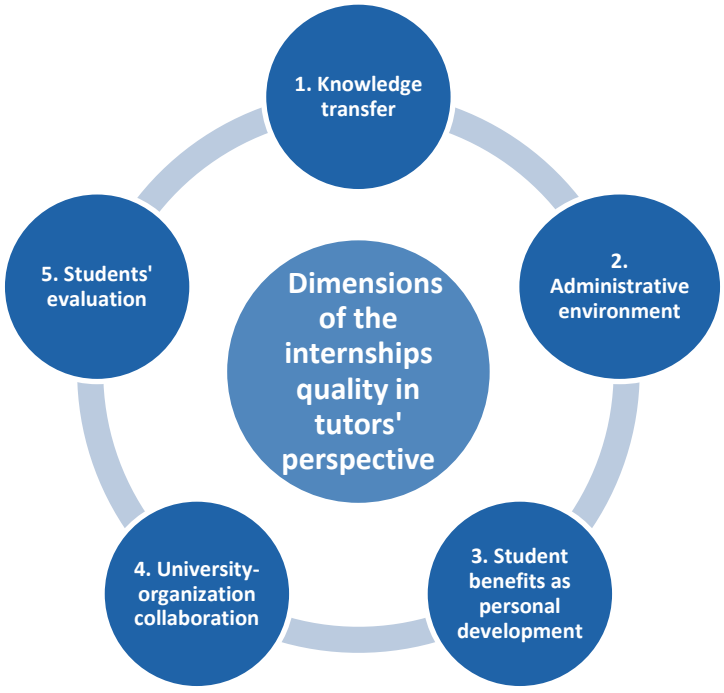


Figure 2. The five dimensions on the quality of internships
Source: Own illustration based on the results from the PCA dimension reduction method.

The second research question concerns the tutor's preferences for hybrid or online internships over the traditional ones, in physical format. The relative frequency distribution of the item 'professors' preference or attitude towards online or hybrid internship' is shown in Figure 3. It is shown that almost 57% (35% - Partial agreement and 21.67% - Total agreement) of the professors in the sample are in favor of online or hybrid internship, while 15% (1.67% – Total disagreement and 13.33% - Partial disagreement) disagree with these, thus favoring traditional (the face-to-face or physical) format of internships. The remaining 28.33% of respondents are indifferent to the two possibilities of organizing internships.

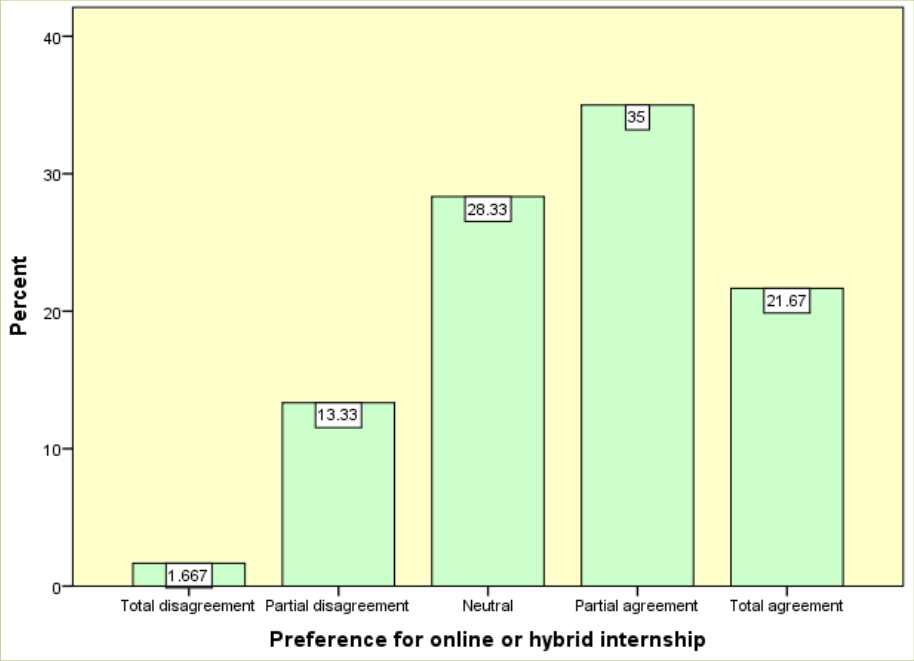


Figure 3. The relative frequency distribution of professors' preference or attitude towards online or hybrid internship

Source: Own illustration based on data from the survey.

In order to analyze whether there are significant differences in the groups that respondents have been classified according to the preference to online or hybrid internship in terms of the first and third dimension obtained after performing factor analysis, the appropriate test is the Kruskal-Wallis nonparametric test, appropriate as the normality distribution on the dependent quantitative variable is not required. The independent variable shows the professors' preferences for online or hybrid internships versus the traditional format, a qualitative variable with five categories discussed in the previous paragraph and shown on the horizontal axis in Figure 3. These categories generate a partition of the statistical population into five groups (the first two correspond to preferences on traditional internships, while the last two to agreement on online or hybrid internships). The quantitative dependent variables considered in the Kruskal-Wallis test are the factors derived from the PCA.

For the first factor (knowledge transfer), Kruskal-Wallis test showed that between the several categories of preference toward organizing the internship online or hybrid, there are no significant differences in the scores of the measure corresponding to professors'

perception with regard to the knowledge students acquired during their studies and which they can apply in their internships. The result is still not significant if, for the independent variable professors' preference toward online of hybrid internships, we consider pooling categories of Total disagreement and Partial disagreement into a new one called Disagreement (Chi Squares test statistic is 4.393 for 3 degrees of freedom, with a p-value=0.222).

There is no association between the preferences for a specific internship format and the remaining quality dimensions, except for the third factor. For the factor measuring students' personal development, the Kruskal-Wallis test null hypothesis of non-significant differences in the scores was rejected (at 5% significance level) in favor of the alternative hypothesis. Therefore, there is a statistically significant difference in tutors' perception over the benefits brought to students participating in internships, with a mean rank factor score of 49.33, the highest, for Disagreement category of online or hybrid internship (otherwise said, for traditional internships category), 22.35 for Neutral opinion, 26.19 for Partial agreement and 35.08, the second highest mean rank, for Total agreement. The figure below (Figure 4) displays the above findings, it can be better seen the first and third factor distribution according to preferences over online or hybrid internships. We notice that although the highest mean rank score of students' benefits in personal development brought by internship was found for professors not agreeing with online or hybrid internship, otherwise said, for academics favoring traditional internships, the extreme opposite category, Total agreement, catches up as the second mean rank score and median score.

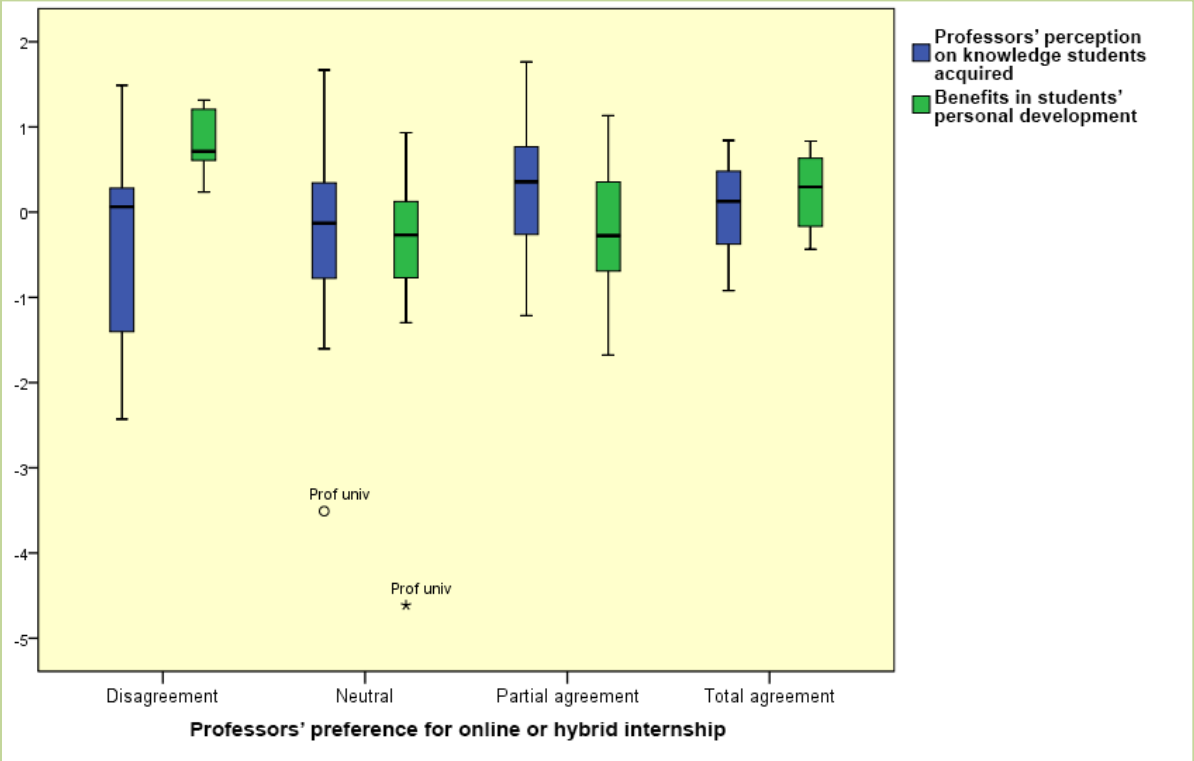


Figure 4. Boxplots of the first and third factor according to preferences over online or hybrid internships

Source: Own illustration based on data from the survey.

To conclude, the second hypothesis H2 is partially confirmed: out of the five dimensions of the internships' quality, the third one is significantly related to the preferences for online and/ or hybrid internships. Tutors who favor the traditional internship also value more the personal development of the students.

For a more detailed understanding of our results, the associations between several individual characteristics of the tutors and their perception of the quality of the internship were analyzed using the same Kruskal-Wallis test. The results show that gender is not generally associated with the identified factors, implying that male and female tutors have similar opinions on the quality of internships. The third factor measuring aspects of the students' personal development is the exception. For this one in particular, there is a statistically significant difference between male and female professors' perception over the benefits brought to students participating in internships, the mean rank factor score being higher for the latter, at 10% significance level. However, work experience, captured by the academic title, is not related to any of the factors that describe the five dimensions.

Finally, we explain our results using three open-ended questions, which focus on the following: positive aspects of the internships during the pandemic, negative aspects, and suggestions for improvement. After synthesizing the data obtained at these three questions and following the text analysis of the open answers, one word-cloud for each dimension has been generated.

Regarding the positive aspects, most responses refer to the development of students' practical skills, anchoring students in reality, and adapting their expectations to the realities of the labor market. Other positive aspects refer to linking/validating theoretical and practical knowledge, developing new skills such as communication, teamwork, time management, empowerment of students, piloting innovative methods (based on online technology) for conducting internships, introducing students to the work environment, the possibility to experience the reality of the profession in person, direct interaction with business people and their daily challenges, work experience for some students, networking, etc. (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. Wordcloud - positive aspects of internships
Source: Own illustration based on data from the survey created with the help of https://monkeylearn.com/wordcloud/, 2022.

As for the negative aspects, most of the responses grouped around the following aspects: lack of interest or managerial capacity to integrate students in the organizations and provide them with relevant tasks, reluctance of companies to receive interns, lack of

internships in the field of study, limited capacity of tutors in the university to check how the internship is carried out and to actually monitor student, lack of coordination of students within organizations, uselessness of documents required for examination, low availability of coordinators in the organization, excessive bureaucracy, short duration, focus on repetitive tasks, lack of interest of students and organizations in some cases, which turns it into a mere formal activity (see Figure 6). It is interesting to note that the online/ hybrid running of internships is reported by some respondents as positive and by others as negative. This indicates a lack of consensus in the academic community on this hot topic.



Figure 6. Wordcloud - negative aspects of internships
Source: Own illustration based on data from the survey created with the help of https://monkeylearn.com/wordcloud/, 2022.

Summarizing the suggestions for improving internships, most of the respondents mention a closer relationship between the university and the internship organizations in order to ensure optimal monitoring, better planning and coordination, optimal and continuous communication between the university tutor and the organization, constant feedback, and thus an increase in the quality of the internship. Also, frequently encountered are issues related to greater involvement and availability of organizations in defining, organizing, and running internships and building sustainable partnerships between the university and organizations in order to secure relevant placements. Another issue relates to awareness-raising campaigns among students on the importance of internships, so that their interest and involvement increases, as well as exposing students during internships to as many different activities as possible, thus avoiding overlap between activities in their current job and those in the internship. Other aspects mentioned concern: integration of interns into the organization and the definition of a clear period during the studies during which the student should carry out only the internship activity, thus being able to properly concentrate on it. Some respondents noticed the need to improve the formal and legal framework, including by offering incentives to organizations that receive trainees. A different attitude of

university management toward internship activity is also suggested, in the sense of allocating and scheduling according to actual needs tutors who are in constant contact with the mentor in the organization and monitor how the internship is carried out for an allocated number of students (see Figure 7).



Figure 7. Wordcloud – Suggestions for the improvement of internships
Source: Own illustration based on data from the survey created with the help of https://monkeylearn.com/wordcloud/, 2022.

An essential element resulting from better coordination of the parties involved would be to improve the university curriculum so that it meets the real needs of employers. In the responses analyzed in this section, the aspect of digitization refers to facilitating online communication (platforms, discussions, etc.) between university managers/tutors and those in internship organizations.

Conclusions

Although tutors from the academic community are not necessarily directly involved in the process of organizing and coordinating the internships in the field of economics and business, they mentor and many times benefit from the knowledge acquired by students participating in internships. During lectures and seminars, they can better link the theoretical approaches to business practice and demonstrate the relevance of some theoretical concepts in the economic environment. Thus, this paper successfully investigates the tutors' opinions on the quality of internships and their preferences for online and/ or hybrid over traditional internships.

The conducted correlation analysis revealed that all the variables involved in the model are positively correlated. According to the Spearman correlation coefficient heat-map diagram, some factors tend to correlate more with each other. For instance, the openness of companies to organizing internships is correlated with the intensity of the relationships between the university and the company. Another interesting result is the fact that, in the tutors' opinion, the students, once familiarized with the organizational environment, tend to appreciate more the utility of theoretical knowledge.

We identified five relevant dimensions of the quality of the internships: knowledge transfer, administrative environment, personal development, collaborative activity, and student evaluation. This result shows that internships go beyond the development of the human capital and points the five relevant features of a successful internship. The identification of these five factors, contributing to a valuable internship experience, is highly relevant for the universities, since it offers them hints about the measures that could be taken to foster the quality of internship programs. On the other side, the study highlights the multifaceted role of tutors. In an online or hybrid internship program, more time should be allocated for the tutoring activities to be able to perform all the support and monitoring tasks at a high professional level. Considering tutors' answers, certain activities can be performed at a similar quality level both in the online/ hybrid and offline context, but some aspects, such as the personal development of the students, are difficult to achieve in a full online format. Therefore, the recommendation in a post-pandemic scenario is to develop mainly hybrid and offline internship programs and just when not possible, to apply the full online format. Also, in a pandemic context, the students' personal development is more associated with the preferences for traditional internship.

The present study could be useful to researchers because it expands the existing studies with new perspectives on the opinions of tutors and other academic supervisors. On the other hand, the paper can also be of interest to higher education institutions because it provides decision-makers at their level the dimensions that explain the quality of internships and guide them to better decisions and more appropriate strategies and curriculum to increase the quality of internships. Also, this study could also help business organizations to provide effective internships for students. The paper shows that professors lack the necessary time to be fully involved in coordinating the internships, so their opinion is limited mainly to the evaluation phase of the process. Thus, we recommend that universities should reconsider the number of hours allocated for the coordination of students during the internship stages and the relationship between university and companies should be tightened. A closer relationship between the mentors from companies and the faculty would lead to a win-win situation.

The study highlights the opinion of tutors from a single university and reveals the professors' opinions from economics and business faculties. Besides being a limitation of the study, this ensures the homogeneity of the internship programs and procedures, leading to reliable results.

Further research can be conducted in order to highlight the improvements in the process. A valuable possibility for expanding the present study and building on the existing research outcomes is to develop a system of minimal standards based on various criteria used for assessing the achievement of the five dimensions of quality internships. Therefore, these criteria could serve as a quality control instrument, and based on them, the compliance with some minimal standards of quality related to the development and implementation of internship programs could be checked for each of the five dimensions depicted in the present paper (see also Hempel and Pantelic, 2020). Future research should also consider students and practitioners' opinions about the content, knowledge acquired, administrative environment, or the duration of internships to improve their overall quality. The sample could also be extended by including other universities from the same field or from other fields of study.

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