Impact of Internship Experience on Professional Development and Career Path Clarity: The Moderating Role of Perceived Stress Among Final Year University Students

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DECLARATION

I, **Ms. Anoshia Shakil**, Registration No. **359-FSS/MSEP/F23** student of **MS** in the subject of Psychology, session **2023-2025**, hereby declare that the matter printed in the thesis titled: Impact of Internship Experience on Professional Development and Career Path Clarity: The Moderating role of Perceived Stress among final year university students is my own work and has not been printed, published and submitted as research work, thesis, or publication in any form in any University, Research Institution etc. in Pakistan or abroad.

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RESEARCH COMPLETION CERTIFICATE

Certified that the research work contained in this thesis titled: Impact of Internship Experience on Professional Development and Career Path Clarity: The Moderating role of Perceived Stress among final year university students has been carried out and completed by Ms. ANOSHIA SHAKIL, Registration No. **359-FSS/MSEP/F23** under my supervision.

_____ _____

Date Supervisor

Dr.Nazia Iqbal

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to all the students who strive to transform their academic learning into meaningful professional growth, and to every individual who face challenges with resilience while pursuing clarity in their life’s path.

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PSQ	Perceived Stress Questionnaire
CDMSE	Career Decision Making Self Efficacy Scale
PD	Professional Development
IE	Internship Experience
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Sciences

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Abstract

In recent years, internship have gained growing importance in higher education as a bridge between Academic knowledge and professional application. For final year students, internship represent a crucial stage in their transition to the workforce, offering opportunities to develop skills, clarify career goals, and gain exposure to work environments. This study aims to examine the impact of internship experience on student professional development and career decision making with perceived stress as a moderating factor. A sample of 300 final year university students was recruited through purposive sampling from various universities in Islamabad. Data was collected using standardized measures. The internship Experience Questionnaire (Jawabri, 2017) was used to asses student perception of their internship environment. The Professional Development Scale (Mourao,2014) measured the growth of students in term of professional knowledge. The Career Decision Making Self Efficacy Scale (Oreshnick,2016) evaluated student's confidence in making informed career decisions, while Perceived Stress Questionnaire (Levenstein,1993) asses how individual's perceive stress. A correlational research design was employed and moderation analysis was conducted to test the hypotheses. The results indicated that internship experience had a significant positive effect on professional development and career decision making. Moreover, Perceived stress was found to play a positive moderating role, enhancing the relationship between internship experience and professional growth. Additional analyses showed differences across gender, faculty, and internship type. These findings highlight that internship not only foster skill development and career clarity but also that manageable level of stress can act as motivating factor.

Keywords: Internship experience, professional development, career decision making, perceived stress

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1

Introduction

Worldwide, internships have grown to be an essential component of higher education curricula. With the job market becoming more competitive, graduates are not only expected to have just academic knowledge but also hands on experience in their fields. This led to universities demanding internships as part of their degree programs or even offering them firsthand exposure to professional settings, these internships gave students the opportunity to learn outside of the classroom. The connection between academic understanding and practical application was facilitated via internships. Scholars and Professionals have increasingly emphasized the importance of internships, with some advocating for their inclusion as required components of university curricula, particularly in business and management programs, to ensure students are well-prepared for the job market (Hiltebeitel,2000; McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006).

Internships were especially crucial for university students in their last year. They gave students the chance to engage with professionals, observe the culture of the business, work in groups, and develop self confidence. Students were frequently able to better grasp their strengths and shortcomings, pinpoint opportunities for growth, and make well informed judgments regarding their future employment as a result of this exposure. Students can better grasp the demands of the professional world, acquire abilities unique to their business, and clarify their career goals by having the chance to obtain practical experience. They give students a chance to get practical experience, learn how to deal with obstacles at work, and develop an understanding of the careers they want to pursue (D'Abate,2009). Additionally, internships helped

students in improving soft skills like time management, problem solving, communication, and teamwork all of which were critical for long term professional success.

Internship experience

Internships have a significant impact on self efficacy, one important psychological component. It is essential in determining a student's professional growth and career choices. The skills students acquire and the encouraging feedback they get from being placed in real world work settings help them feel competent and in control, which boost their self confidence. Students self efficacy increases as they become more aware of their talents and shortcomings, which affects their confidence in their capacity to choose fulfilling careers. In this sense, internships assist students feel more capable of following their career goals in addition to helping them acquire new skills (D'Abate,2009; Renganathan,2012).

Students professional identities were significantly shaped by their internship experiences. Students gained a better understanding of their career aspirations and were able to identify their interests by taking part in the daily activities of an organization. Internships allow students to assess their potential for success in various professions typically leading to more career certainty and better career decisions (Renganathan,2012).The importance of internships in today's academic and professional environment was further highlighted by the fact that many students who did well during their internships were offered full time positions following graduation.

However, it was crucial to recognize that not all internship experiences were the same. Many factors, including the type of organization, degree of supervision, allocated responsibilities, working environment, and mentor assistance, influenced the quality and outcome of an internship. According to some students, their internships were incredibly fulfilling

and helped them become more confident and clear about their career go0als. Others, however, reported difficulties such as unrelated assignments, a lack of feedback, or limited learning chances, resulting in dissatisfaction or confusion.

Perceived Stress

While internships are valuable, they also introduce students to new tasks and responsibilities. Many students had to balance their internships with their personal obligations or academic burdens. Managing these expectations frequently led to higher stress levels. One significant element influencing how students perceived and responded to their internships was perceived stress. Students might be encouraged to do better if the stress was managed.

The degree to which people believe that their circumstances are overpowering, unmanageable, and unexpected is known as perceived stress. It focuses on how people subjectively evaluate the pressures they experience rather than providing an objective measure of stress (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). Two persons may encounter the same event, such as an internship burden, but interpret and respond to it in different ways based on their coping capacities, resilience, and support systems. The idea of perceived stress is essential to comprehending why some students experience anxiety or demotivation while others are inspired by the demands of internship duties.

Students who successfully handle their stress by using adaptive coping mechanisms, like problem solving, reaching out for help, and emotional control, typically report more professional development and a clearer understanding of their career objectives (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Therefore perceived stress should not always be viewed as detrimental in moderate amount it may serve as a motivational factor pushing students to perform better during internship fostering greater professional growth and career clarity.

Professional development

Internships offered students with a unique opportunity to engage in professional development a critical process by which individuals acquire the skills, knowledge, and competencies required for success in the workplace. Research has consistently shown that internships have a positive effect on student's employability and professional growth. Undergraduate business students who participated in internships reported greater levels of job success, according to Gault, Redington and Schlager (2000), who attributed this to the professional skills and real world experience they acquired during their placements. In a similar vein, Binder (2015) emphasized that internships greatly improve students preparedness for the profession by fostering the development of soft skills like problem solving, teamwork, and communication across a range of fields. Gaining advanced knowledge in a particular subject was only one aspect of this professional development; interpersonal skills like leadership, problem solving, communication, and teamwork were also developed, all of which were essential for long term career success. Students were able to develop and improve these abilities under the supervision of experienced professionals by engaging themselves in a work environment through internships. Students gained experience managing their time, working cooperatively, adapting to various situations, and applying their theoretical knowledge in practical contexts by being exposed to the everyday realities of the workplace. This experience was very beneficial in helping students develop a strong professional identity, which is critical to their future career success. Additionally, internships allowed students an opportunity to obtain real world experience that improved their career prospects.

Employers in current highly competitive employment market frequently look for applicants who have shown their ability to function in a professional environment in addition to having academic credentials. Students who participated in internships had useful practical experience that increased their employability. Having this real world experience can frequently be the difference between getting a job offer and being unemployed for a long time after graduation. Through internships, students were able to gain a more thorough grasp of their areas of strength and growth, which helped them to continuously improve their professional skills.

Additionally, internships provided a crucial forum for promoting professional growth outside of the classroom. They gave students the opportunity to hone their working skills and get a practical understanding of job functions and industry standards. Student's job preparedness and professional maturity were improved by this exposure, which allowed them to put theoretical ideas into reality. Jackson (2015) claims that because internships helped students gain confidence, practical skills, and a deeper comprehension of workplace dynamics, they reported far greater levels of perceived employability. In a similar vein, Finch et al. (2013) contended that graduates with internship experience were more likely to have the leadership, communication, and critical thinking abilities that employers value in contemporary organizational contexts. Mentoring and input from professionals in the field were also essential components of professional development during internships. Students learned how to handle workplace obstacles, negotiate professional contexts, and constantly grow through performance based feedback under the supervision of experienced mentors.

In addition to speeding up skill learning, this continuous Assistance encouraged self-awareness and growth oriented mindsets. Employer assessments show a substantial correlation between internship experience and job readiness markers like professionalism, communication, and teamwork, as noted by NACE (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2022).

As students started to consider themselves as active participants in the fields they have selected, internships also helped them develop a professional identity. A key element of identity Development and sustained career engagement is creating a sense of belonging in a professional community (Trede, Macklin, & Bridges 2012). Students might identify their areas of strength, fill in gaps in skills, and match their objectives with those of the profession through practical experience. According to Sweitzer and King (2014), this process of professional socialization facilitates a more seamless transfer into the workforce by bridging the gap between student and job.

Career decision making

During the internship, having a clear career path was just as important. Selecting a career path can be a challenging decision for many students, frequently hindered by uncertainty or ignorance of the duties associated with certain professions. Numerous studies have demonstrated the vital role that internships play in assisting students in defining their career goals and understanding the working world. According to Gault, Leach, and Duey (2010), internships give students the chance to discover their passions, determine whether they are a good fit for a

particular sector, and learn about the duties of a regular employment. They are able to make well informed decisions regarding their future careers because to this hands on experience. Additionally, because internships expose students to real world settings that either validate or reroute their initial career objectives, they can have a favorable impact on decision making self efficacy and career maturity (Chakrabarti, 2013). However, as D'Abate, Youndt, and Wenzel (2009) point out, the effectiveness of an internship is largely determined by its quality badly designed internships can cause confusion and dissatisfaction and may even make students more unsure about their future career prospects. Students utilized internships as a valuable tool to define their professional goals and gain insight into the realities of various positions and industries. Students were able to test their interest in a particular profession and make better selections about their future occupations through practical exposure. Through internships, students were able to assess if their personal beliefs, interests, and abilities aligned with the career they believed they wanted to pursue. Internships not just helped students determine their desired career paths, but also allowed them to build relationships with professionals in their field of interest.

These professional relationships frequently influenced student's career choices and gave them valuable information about what it takes to be successful in the profession they have selected. Students may obtain important advice, employment chances, and career specific knowledge that aided in their decision making by working on group projects, and forming bonds with peers and mentors. However, internships did not always provide clear guidance on career prospects. Some students ended up feeling more hesitant or even dejected if the internship experience did not live up to their expectations, rather than more confident in their career choices. For instance, students who had bad experiences like poorly designed programs

insufficient mentoring, or a lack of interesting work might have been more confused or unsure about their future jobs after they left their internship. In certain situations, the internship may even work against you by increasing your level of confusion and leaving you unsure of your post graduation job path.

Theoretical Framework

The Challenge Hindrance Stress Model (Cavanaugh et al., 2000) provides a comprehensive framework to understand how stress influences individual outcomes such as professional development, performance, and career decision making. This model differentiates between two types of stressors challenge stressors and hindrance stressors based on how individuals perceive and evaluate them.

Challenge stressors refer to demands or situations that, although potentially stressful, are seen as opportunities for growth, learning, and achievement. In the context of internships, such stressors encourage students to develop essential professional competencies, strengthen problem solving skills, and gain clarity in their career paths. This type of stress can enhance self efficacy, resilience, and motivation ultimately contributing positively to professional and personal growth.

In contrast, hindrance stressors are perceived as barriers that obstruct personal development and goal achievement. These include unclear expectations, lack of supervisor support, excessive workload, or poor organizational structure. When interns face these types of stressors, they may experience frustration, decreased motivation, and ambiguity in their career decisions, which can hinder both learning and professional development.

This model is especially relevant to internship experiences, as internships naturally expose students to various work related demands. How students perceive and cope with

these demands determines whether stress becomes a driver of growth (challenge) or a barrier (hindrance). Thus, stress functions as a moderating factor between internship experiences and developmental outcomes. Positive and structured internship experiences are likely to produce challenge stressors, leading to higher professional development and clearer career decision making. Conversely, poorly managed or mismatched internships may create hindrance stressors that reduce these positive outcomes.

Overall, the Challenge Hindrance Stress Model explains the dual role of stress within the internship context, emphasizing that not all stress is detrimental. The nature of stress appraisal determines whether it contributes to or detracts from students professional and career growth. This theoretical lens effectively supports the present study's aim of examining how internship experiences influence professional development and career decision making through the moderating role of perceived stress.

Literature review

Gault, Leach, Duey (2010) discovered that business internships have a significant positive effect on students employability, confidence, and practical skills. Employer evaluation data was used in their study, which showed that students who took part in internships were more equipped to handle pressures at work and adjust to professional settings. Through internships, students can put their academic knowledge into practice in real world settings while also developing essential skills like communication, problem solving, teamwork, and time management. According to employers, students who have completed internships exhibit greater professionalism, initiative, and self assurance, which

increases their potential for employment. All things considered, this study shows that internships are a vital connection between academic learning and professional readiness, developing both soft skills and technical expertise that are highly valued by employers.

Binder et al. (2015) investigated the effect of internship involvement on student career adaptability. According to their research, internships greatly improve students ability to manage their professional paths by fostering the four essential components of career adaptability which is confidence, curiosity, control, and concern. The development of soft skills like communication, problem solving, and adaptability which are valued highly in the competitive job market of today is strongly related to these dimensions.

The study highlights how internships give students hands on, real world experience that enables them to assess their performance, use their theoretical knowledge, and adjust to problems in the workplace. Students thereby improve their professional identities, self efficacy, and readiness for future job options These findings support the notion that internships serve as helpful source for transferring academic knowledge into professional skills.

Odio and Kerwin (2016) investigated how particular internship features and significant circumstances encountered during these placements affect students aspirations to work in their profession of choice. According to their research, students comprehension of professional standards and workplace dynamics is greatly improved by structured internships that offer defined positions, considerable duties, and efficient mentoring. It has been discovered that critical events, which include both positive experiences like completing a project successfully and receiving praise, as well as difficulties and disagreements, influence students career goals by encouraging reflection and adaptability. All things considered, the research shows that internships are essential for students to acquire both technical and soft skills as well as for making confident, realistic, and well informed professional selections.

McHugh (2017) investigated the effect of internship characteristics specifically salary, supervision, and job design on internship efficacy, concluding that the quality of internship programs has a significant impact on student results. The study discovered that internships with more mentorship and assistance from supervisors were linked to higher levels of satisfaction, more developmental value, and more definite intentions to work for the host company after graduation. On the other hand, internships that lacked structured supervision and purposeful work assignments caused students to become confused and less motivated. Interestingly, the study found that mentoring and assistance from supervisors were important indicators of internship effectiveness.

A research by Callanan and Benzing (2004) evaluated the contribution of internships to college graduates career oriented employment. While completing an internship was associated with obtaining a career oriented job, their research showed that it is also associated with a greater degree of confidence regarding one's personal fit with the selected profession. This

research emphasizes how crucial internship program quality and design are in shaping students career choices and results. According to the report, internships should be well planned and administered to guarantee that they offer meaningful experiences that complement students professional

Weible and McClure (2011) conducted a study called An Exploration of the Benefits of Student Internships to Marketing Departments, which examines the benefits of internship programs from the viewpoint of higher education marketing departments. While the study is largely concerned with institutional benefits such as improved classroom discussions, higher enrollment, and improved department reputation, it also mentions excellent student outcomes. According to the authors, compared to students without internship experience, individuals who take part in internships have a higher chance of obtaining a job sooner, obtaining a better job, and earning more money.

Bawica (2021) conducted a quantitative research of 88 Filipino student interns to investigate the impact of internship programs in improving employability readiness. In addition to the presence of challenging tasks, effective supervision, task clarity, and compensation within the internship structure, the study identified a number of important factors that contribute to successful internship outcomes, such as students academic preparedness, positive attitude, and self initiative. When taken as a whole, these components were shown to greatly enhance students views toward their future occupations and employability preparation. The results highlight the importance of internship quality and design in influencing students professional growth and providing clarity and confidence in their decision making regarding careers.

The study conducted by Vocal et al. (2023) investigates on how internships affect the professional and personal growth of college graduates from different Santa Rosa, Laguna based

universities. The study evaluates peer relationships, confidence, responsibility, productivity, and mentor influence using survey questions. The results show that internships significantly improve both professional and personal traits, including task management and accountability, as well as interpersonal skills and self assurance. The study comes to the conclusion that internships are a vital connection between academic learning and practical experience, and that both professional and personal growth are critical for career advancement.

Sanahuja Vélez and Ribes Giner (2015) conducted a thorough systematic analysis of 57 empirical studies to assess the impact of business internships on students, employers, and higher education institutions. According to their review, internships are essential for improving students employability, professional skills, and academic learning. They are also a vital tool for career exploration and decision making. The results showed that internships facilitate easier transitions into the workforce by assisting students in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and real world application. Internships have also been demonstrated to promote increased self efficacy, professional maturity, and confidence in pursuing future career pathways. The study emphasized that well designed internship programs enhance university employer relationships and enhance the institution's reputation in addition to providing benefits to students.

Narayanan, Olk, and Fukami (2010) created a multistage model to investigate the factors influencing internship efficacy, focusing on the responsibilities of three important individuals: students, universities, and businesses. The study emphasizes that the quality of mentorship, how well the internship aligns with academic goals, and the support offered by the organization that hosts the internship are all factors that affect how effective internships are, in addition to the work completed. The authors discovered through an exploratory examination of data from

Portuguese internships that the roles and interactions of these individuals had an impact on the satisfaction of students,

In order to investigate the relationship between self reported employability and the perceived quality of internships, Ebner, Soucek, and Selenko (2021) conducted a study among graduate students participating in internships. Their study introduced the term "career entry worries," which describes the concern about finding a good job after graduation. The study discovered that over the course of eight weeks, highly regarded internships decreased these concerns about job entry, which in turn improved graduates self perceived employability. This implies that internships improve employability perceptions by reducing uncertainty about future employment in addition to enhancing skills and knowledge. The authors highlight the value of excellent internships in helping students get ready for the workforce and ease concerns about their careers.

Feng et al. (2023) used a sample of 576 Chinese participants to perform a thorough empirical study on how internship satisfaction effects career identification behavior among fresh graduates. The authors developed and verified a mediation model based on social exchange theory, according to which internship satisfaction influences professional identity in a positive way through the transactional, relational, and developmental aspects of the psychological contract. The findings demonstrated that each of these three dimensions is greatly improved by internship satisfaction, with the developmental contract having the strongest mediating effect and resulting in stronger career identity behaviors like professional commitment, self-recognition of occupational roles, and career engagement. According to these findings, fulfilling internships help graduates develop a clearer sense of professional identity by confirming opportunities for

growth, emotional belonging, and reciprocal expectations all of which are critical components of career clarity and long term professional orientation.

Ndamase and Lukman (2024) investigated the impact of internship programs on students at a public higher education institution in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, using a qualitative design and semi structured interviews. According to the study, internships provide an essential platform for experiential learning, enabling students to apply their academic knowledge while developing essential job skills. The participants highlighted how these experiences improved their comprehension of professional requirements, increased their employability, and gave them valuable exposure to professional contexts. Crucially, internships were also said to boost students self-esteem and awareness of careers, enabling them to better define their future goals and preferred careers. The study found that internship programs strengthen linkages between universities and workforce in addition to improving student results.

According to a systematic evaluation of 31 studies on international internships by Giorgio Di Pietro (2022), these experiences greatly improved intrapersonal abilities like self confidence and open mindedness as well as intercultural competency and practical knowledge. Notably, most research showed significant increases in personal confidence and adaptability two crucial aspects of professional development According to the research, students who participated in foreign internships were able to gain experience that not only helped them use their academic knowledge but also helped them build global mindsets and self reliance, which increased their employability and resilience in a variety of job environments.

Pianda, Hilmiana, Widianto, and Sartika (2024) conducted a comprehensive bibliometric and systematic review to investigate the effect of internship experiences on vocational students employability. The results of their analysis of 23 studies published between 2009 and 2023

showed that important factors such employer engagement, experiential learning, student satisfaction, and internship program design are essential to improving employability. These elements frequently surfaced as theme pillars, emphasizing how internships that are properly organized greatly aid in the development of qualities that are relevant to a profession. The article's observations support the idea that internships, especially for vocational learners, are essential bridges between academic knowledge and practical preparedness in addition to being learning platforms.

According to Cheung and Arnold (2014), internships and other job exploration activities are essential for improving students capacity for making career decisions. Their research on Chinese university students in Hong Kong showed that taking use of experiential learning opportunities greatly increased students self efficacy in making career decisions and their knowledge of job related topics. Internships and other job exploration activities help students clarify their professional aspirations and boost their confidence in making welli nformed career decisions by bridging the gap between academic knowledge and practical experience. According to the research, students professional identities and career growth are significantly enhanced by practical experience, which also enhances academic learning.

According to Sanahuja Vélez and Ribes Giner (2015), internships play an important role in helping students "solidify or clarify their interest in a specific work setting." Their research indicates that internships give students an insight into professional settings, allowing them to assess the potential of a chosen career path, test their abilities, and consider their own interests and career goals. By bridging the gap between professional practice and academic understanding, this experiential learning method helps students make better career selections. Students who participate in practical activities and responsibilities have a greater understanding of the

requirements and expectations of specific career sectors, which eventually improves career clarity and lowers ambiguity about future career choices.

Recent studies have highlighted the dual nature of stress, indicating that it can have a positive impact on performance and personal growth when viewed as a challenge rather than a danger. For example, a 2024 study that examined the effect of challenge time pressure on the innovative behavior of doctoral students was published in Frontiers in Psychology. The study found a significant positive correlation between innovation outcomes, research self efficacy, and positively perceived time pressure (Frontiers in Psychology, 2024). The results show that doctoral students who view time restrictions as chances for development rather than as overwhelming demands are more motivated, have better problem solving abilities, and are more creative associated with eustress.

Another longitudinal study, published in BMC Psychiatry (2023), investigated the association between nursing students perceived stress before and after internships. The results showed that students perceived stress had a more beneficial effect on their post internship outcomes when they showed a greater dedication to their professions. In another words, stress served as a motivating factor rather than a hindrance for students who shown greater levels of professional dedication and adaptability, allowing them to participate in learning activities more successfully and further their career development overall. These findings demonstrate the dual function of stress, indicating that it can support rather than impede professional development when handled with dedication and fortitude.

Bayram and Bilgel (2008) conducted a major Turkish study titled "The prevalence and socio demographic correlations of depression, anxiety, and stress among a group of university students, which found strong evidence of gender differences in student stress. Significant

prevalence rates were identified by the authors in all three areas, with stress and anxiety being the most prevalent. Importantly, the study discovered that female students had considerably higher scores on the anxiety and stress subscales than male students, suggesting that women in Turkish universities bear a heavier load of perceived stress. All things considered, the study shows a distinct and statistically validated gender gap in stress perception, placing female students at more risk for psychological and academic pressures.

Another Study have shown that there are significant gender differences in how stress is experienced and coping mechanisms. Matud (2004) did a detailed investigation on these disparities and discovered that women report higher levels of stress than men. One explanation for this disparity is that female are more likely to deal with stress, making negative and uncontrollable life events seem more devastating. In order to handle the emotional effects of stress rather than directly address the stressor, women tend to choose emotion focused coping techniques, such as seeking emotional support, acceptance, disengagement. Male, on the other hand, are more likely to use problem focused coping mechanisms, which aim to deal with and reduce stressors directly (Matud, 2004).

McHugh (2017) investigated the impact of compensation, supervision, and task design on internship efficacy and demonstrated how these factors influence the developmental value of internships. Because paid internships were more likely to involve skill building activities, structured supervision, and meaningful work duties, the study indicated that students who took part in paid internships reported higher levels of internship efficacy. Financial compensation, according to McHugh, not only reduces stress but also encourages students to take their internships more seriously, which maximizes the learning opportunity. These results imply that

paid internships improve career-related outcomes by boosting students self-esteem, solidifying their professional identities, and providing more clarity when it comes to choosing a career path.

Merlin Knoblich and Brookover (2022) used a retrospective survey of 95 adolescent participants in a paid summer internship program to investigate the impacts on professional self efficacy and career decision-making self-efficacy. The findings showed statistically significant gains in both domains, indicating that paid internships boost teenagers self confidence in their capacity to successfully pursue their professional goals and make wise career decisions. These results provide evidence to the idea that well designed internship programs enhance the psychological foundations of career clarity in addition to skill development, enhancing the self-belief required to make early career decisions.

Contextual Evidence from Pakistani Literature

Anjum (2020), who conducted a comprehensive survey with 800 business students from Pakistan, discovered that internships greatly improved both professional and personal development. After their internships, students reported significant gains in critical thinking, leadership, teamwork, and career readiness. The study verified that internships give students a better understanding of workplace dynamics and expectations by bridging the gap between theoretical learning and practical experience. The study confirmed that skill development and self awareness are fostered by well structured internships, emphasizing improved employability and maturity.

Shaheen, Muzamil, and Shiraz (2022) carried out a quantitative study on the association between internship experiences and employability among graduate students at public universities in Lahore. The study used ANOVA, t-tests, and Pearson correlation to examine the data from a

substantial sample of 291 students. The findings showed that students employability abilities and their involvement in internships were significantly positively correlated.

Waqar (2024) investigated how internship programs affect student career development at Pakistan's Lahore School of Economics. The study came to the conclusion that internship programs are essential for students to improve their practical knowledge, professional competencies, and networking skills through a qualitative content analysis of secondary data sources, including university documents and journal databases (JSTOR, ScienceDirect). Together, these experiences help students become more aware of market demands and prepared to use their theoretical knowledge in practical settings, which facilitates easier transfers into the job and increases career clarity.

Wasi and Lodhi (2015) investigated the influence of internships on student career development by conducting surveys among university students in Karachi, Pakistan. The results showed that internships greatly improved students exposure to work situations, skill development, and career awareness. Respondents emphasized that internships strengthened professional competence and confidence by offering a hands on training environment where academic concepts could be implemented. Crucially, the survey highlighted that students viewed internships as a significant step in being ready for professional roles because they enhanced employability and helped them better understand potential career options. This study emphasizes the value of internships in Pakistan's higher education system, confirming its function in assisting students in developing their career clarity and preparedness as well as in bridging the academic professional divide.

This literature provided a thorough knowledge and solid empirical support for the current study, which examined the impact of internship experience on professional development and career path clarity, with perceived stress serving as a moderator. It provided useful insights into how internships shape students skills, identity, and career choices, as well as highlighting the psychological and emotional factors such as perceived stress that influence these outcomes. All of these research together provide a more thorough knowledge of the dynamic relationship between experiential learning and final year university students preparedness for the workforce.

Rationale

The transition from university to professional life is a crucial developmental period for students, comprising major psychological, emotional, and social changes. During this phase, student's future performance is determined by their ability to develop professional competences and clear career paths. Internships have evolved as a vital educational practice for bridging the gap between theoretical learning and practical application, providing opportunities to improve knowledge, skills, and employability (Beard, 2007; Gault, 2010; Renganathan, 2012; Jackson, 2017). Internships enable students to build self efficacy, confidence in their career choices, and significant relationships within their professional disciplines by offering organized work related experiences.

Despite these advantages, internships are not without difficulties. Balancing academic commitments with professional tasks, managing performance expectations, and navigating uncertain occupational roles are common sources of stress for students. Stress has historically been seen as a hindrance that hinders learning and career advancement (Misra & McKean, 2000). Emerging viewpoints, however, emphasize that stress can serve as a driving force that promotes resilience, adaptive coping mechanisms, and deeper skill development when it is viewed and

handled constructively (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Perceived stress may have two effects in this context, influencing whether internships are viewed as chances for development or as overwhelming challenges.

While previous research has focused on the association between internship experience and outcomes such as employability and job preparation (Gault et al., 2010; Lam & Ching, 2007), fewer considerations has been given to the moderating impact of perceived stress in this relationship. Particularly in South Asian contexts, where students frequently encounter additional academic and societal constraints, little is known about how perceived stress may help or hinder the transformation of internship experiences into professional development and career path clarity.

This study aims to address these gaps by studying the impact of internship experiences on professional development and career decision making, as well as the moderating function of perceived stress. The study provides a new perspective on how students use internship challenges to develop resilience, competence, and clarity about their future jobs by viewing stress not just as an adverse effect but also as a potential positive motivator of progress.

The findings of this study were aimed to provide significant insights for universities, career counselors, and policymakers in establishing internship programs and support systems that maximize professional satisfaction while assisting students in managing stress constructively. Thus, by providing evidence based suggestions to improve internship procedures in higher education, this study will advance a more thorough knowledge of the relationship among stress, career development, and experiential learning.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study include:

1. To examine the impact of internship experience on professional development and career path clarity.
2 To explore the moderating role of perceived stress in the relationship between internship experience, career path clarity and professional development
3 To examine the effect of demographic variables such as gender, academic major, status of internship paid or unpaid on perceived stress, professional development, career path clarity and internship experience.

Hypotheses

1. Internship experience positively influences the professional development of final year university students.
2. Internship experience positively influences career decision making clarity among final year university students.
3. Perceived stress positively moderates the relationship between internship experience and professional development among final year university students.
4. Perceived stress positively moderates the relationship between internship experience and career decision making clarity among final year university students.
5. Final year students who completed paid internships exhibit higher career decision making clarity than those who completed unpaid internships.
6. Female students report significantly higher levels of perceived stress compared to male students.

7. Students from Business studies report significant internship experience than students from Art and Design and Media and communication studies.

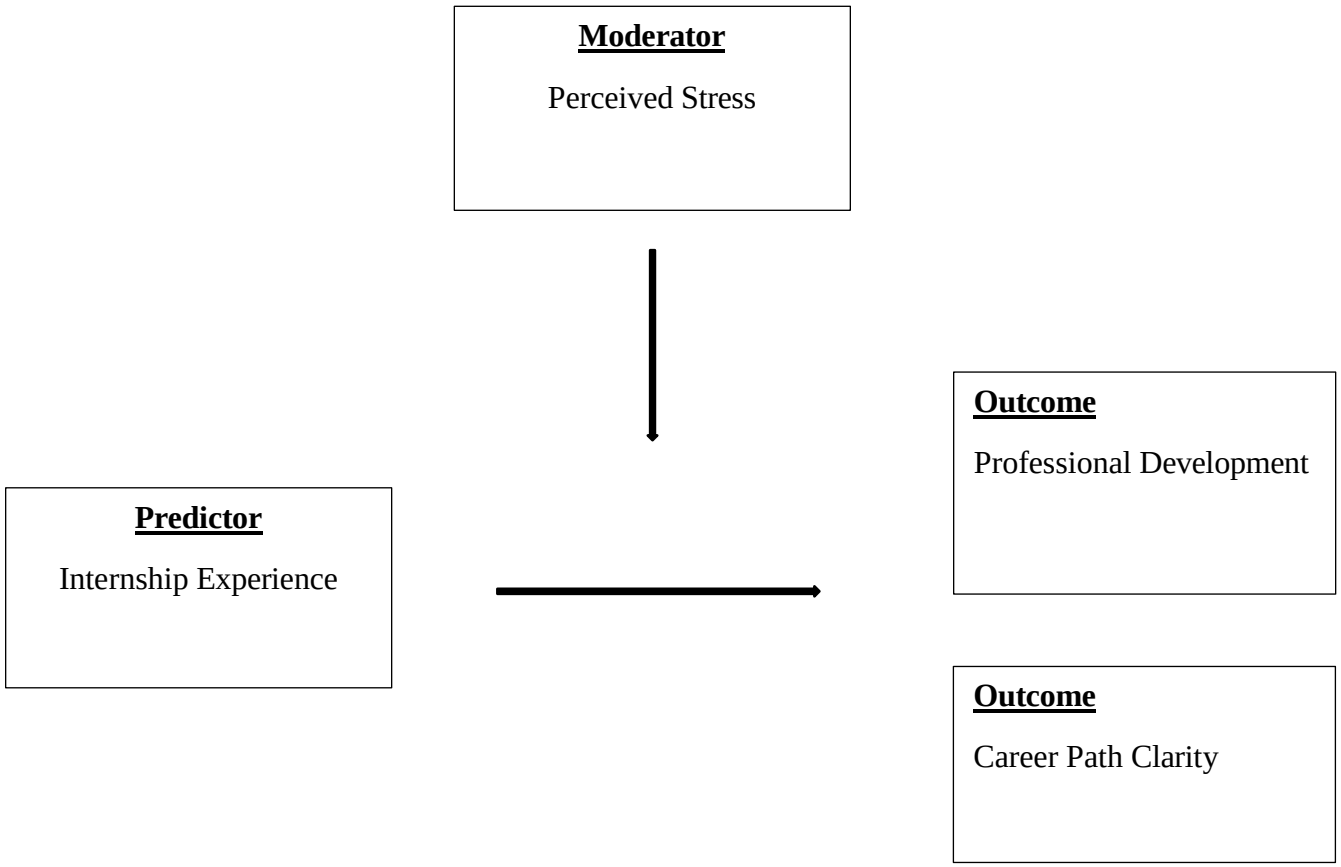

Figure 1

Simple Moderation Model

Method

Chapter 2

Method

Research Design

The comparative correlational research design was employed to investigate the relationships between the variables studied, which included internship experience, professional development, perceived stress, and career decision making. The survey approach was used to obtain data from the target demographic of final year university students.

Sample

The sample included 300 final year university students who had completed at least one internship. The participants were aged range from 23 and above The required sample size was determined using the G power tool. The purposive sampling technique was used to gather the data. The survey approach was employed, with standardized questions provided to the participants.

Inclusion Criteria. The study included students who were currently in their final year of a bachelor's or master's degree program and had completed at least one internship (paid or unpaid). Participants were chosen from a variety of Islamabad universities, such as FAST, NUML, Iqra University, and International Islamic University.

Exclusion Criteria Students who had not yet reached the final year of a bachelor's or master's program, those who had not completed any internship, and students with incomplete internships were excluded from the study.

Operational Definitions

Internship Experience

The internship experience is defined as a structured, career related work experience that

integrates theoretical understanding from the classroom with practical application in a professional setting (Sweitzer & King, 2009). In the current study, internship experience was defined as any supervised, time limited placement whether paid or unpaid completed by participants during their education. Opportunities for skill development, professional exposure, and career exploration related to the student's academic background were expected to arise from these internships.

Professional Development

Professional development is defined as the process of acquiring the skills, knowledge, and experiences required to improve one's performance and progress in a specific field (Guskey 2000). Professional development in this study was defined as the students' reported improvement in communication, confidence, problem solving, decision making, and future employment preparation as a result of their internship experience.

Career Path Clarity

Career path clarity is defined as an individual's clear grasp of their career goals, the steps required to accomplish them, and confidence in their chosen path (Gati, Krausz, & Osipow, 1996). In the current study, career path clarity was defined as student's certainty about their future career plans, ambitions, and professional orientation, as influenced by their internship experience.

Perceived Stress

Perceived stress is defined as an individual's perception of stressful, unpredictable, and overwhelming situations in their lives. (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). In the current study, perceived stress referred to the participants' subjective assessment of the stress associated with combining academic commitments, internship expectations, and future professional decisions. This construct highlight how individual differences in perception and coping shape whether stress becomes a hindrance or serves as a motivating factor in professional development

Instruments

Data was collected using the following instruments.

Perceived Stress Questionnaire

The Perceived Stress Questionnaire (PSQ) was developed by Levenstein et al in 1993 to measure people's perceived stress across time, with a focus on how they perceive and react to stress in daily life. This scale is widely used in research to evaluate the subjective experience of stress and the psychological response to life demands making it particularly suitable for examining how internship experience may influence student's perceived stress. Participants stress levels during the last year are measured using the 30-item PSQ. Participants indicate how frequently they experienced particular stress related feelings and thoughts on a 4-point Likert scale, with 1 denoting "almost" and 4 denoting "usually." The overall score is computed by adding the responses to all 30 items. This 30 item scale showed outstanding reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = .988$

Internship Experience Scale

The Internship Experience Scale was adapted from the work of Jawabri's (2017) research to examine university students impressions of their internship experiences. it measure students perception of the quality and value of their internship experience. A 5 point Likert scale, with 1 denoting "strongly disagree" and 5 denoting "strongly agree," is used to rate the measures of 24 items. Different aspects of the internship experience were being measured in this scales. Which includes positive work environment, comfortable work environment and new skills .The sum of all item responds provides the overall internship experience score, which can range from 24 to 120. By assessing these factors the scale provide a comprehensive view of how enriching and beneficial an internship has been for student's professional growth and career preparation. More satisfying and rewarding internship experiences are indicated by higher overall scores. The

Cronbach's alpha for the scale was α = .975 indicating strong internal consistency.

The Short Form Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy Scale

The Short Form Career Decision Making Self Efficacy Scale (SFCDMSE) was developed by Craig Allan Oreshnick (2011) as a concise version of original Career Decision Making Self Efficacy scale developed by Betz, Klein and Taylor (1996). This scale measures people's confidence in their abilities to make career decisions. It asses multiple facets of self efficacy in career decision making including goal setting and gathering career information. The scale consists of 20 items. The response format uses a 10-point Likert scale, with 0 Representing "not at all confident" and 9 representing "completely confident". The SFCDMSE has significant psychometric properties, with a Cronbach's alpha value of α = .920 indicating a high level of internal consistency.

Professional Development Short Scale

Professional Development Short Scale (PDSS) was developed by Mourão et al. (2014) to assess professional growth among employees in various occupations. This scale is intended to assess crucial aspects of professional advancement, such as self perception of skills, feedback from supervisors, and overall professional development.

The PDSS consist of eight items scored on a seven point Likert scale, with one indicating "strongly disagree" and seven indicating "strongly agree." The scale has strong reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha α = .973.

Demographic Sheet

The demographic sheet included information on age, gender, no. of siblings, birth order Marital status, Program Type, Semester, Faculty, CGPA and Type of Internship.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval was attained from Ethical Review Board, Department of Psychology, IIUI, Ethics Committee, along with head of the institutes. The participants informed consent was also obtained, and their privacy and confidentiality regarding the matters, was ensured.

Procedure

The supervisor provided the authorization letter for data collection, which included the name of the university and the research topic. The participants were gathered from a range of Islamabad universities. Informed consent was requested from the participants after a brief explanation of the study. Their uncertainties were resolved. Furthermore, participants were asked to answer questions honestly and candidly. The participants were then given all of the questionnaires. They were acknowledged at the end for their valuable time and cooperation. Some people thought the survey was too lengthy and chose not to participate. While some gave the same answer to every question, others left several blank or unanswered. A total of 300 data points were analysed using SPSS version 23.0. The data analyses was comprised of the descriptive analysis, correlation, multiple regression, moderation, t-test, and anova-test in order to determine the outcomes of the study

Results

Chapter 3

Results

The present study aimed to examine the impact of internship experience on professional development and career path clarity among final year university students, with a specific focus on the moderating role of perceived stress in these relationships. To test the proposed hypotheses, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0 was employed for data analysis. The results obtained through various statistical techniques are detailed in this section.

Table 1

Frequencies and Percentages of Demographic Variables of Study (N = 300)

Variable	Category	F	%
Gender	Male	150	50.0
	Female	150	50.0
Marital Status	Unmarried	241	80.3
	Married	59	19.7
Birth Order	First Born	128	42.7
	Only Child	68	22.7
	Middle Born	57	19.0
	Last Born	47	15.7
Program Type	Undergraduate	202	67.3
	Graduate	98	32.7
Faculty	Faculty of Social Science	98	32.7

	Faculty of Computing and Information Technology	47	15.7
	Faculty of Business Administration	51	17.0
	Faculty of Media and Communication Studies	54	18.0
	Faculty of Art and Design	50	16.7
Internship Type	Unpaid	208	69.3
	Paid	92	30.7
Age	23 Years	80	26.7
	24 Years	150	50.0
	25 Years	60	20.0
	26 Years	10	3.3
Siblings	0-1	40	13.3
	2-3	180	60.0
	4-5	80	26.7
CGPA	2.0-2.5	50	16.7
	2.6-3.0	90	30.0

3.1-3.5	100	33.3
3.6-4.0	60	20.0

Note: f= Frequency, %= Percentages

Table 1 shows the frequencies and percentages of the study's demographic data, which include gender, marital status, birth order, program type, faculty, and internship type. Males (n = 150; 50.0%) and females (n = 150; 50.0%) made up the study's gender balanced sample, suggesting that both genders were equally represented in the study.

The majority of participants were unmarried (n = 241; 80.3%), with only 19.7% (n = 59) married, indicating that most respondents were students who had not yet married. In terms of birth order, first-borns (n = 128; 42.7%) had the highest proportion of participants, followed by only children (n = 68; 22.7%), middle born (n = 57; 19.0%), and last born (n = 47; 15.7%), indicating that first borns and only children made up the majority of this sample.

In terms of educational program, the majority of participants (n = 202; 67.3%) were enrolled in undergraduate programs, with graduate students (n = 98; 32.7%) making up a smallerpercentage, indicating that the sample was predominantly composed of undergraduates. Following Media and Communication Studies (n = 54; 18.0%), Business Administration (n = 51; 17.0%), Art and Design (n = 50; 16.7%), and Computing and IT (n = 47; 15.7%), the Faculty of Social Sciences had the largest presence within the faculty (n = 98; 32.7%). This suggests that fields of social science represented the majority of respondents.

In terms of internship type, unpaid internships (n = 208; 69.3%) were more common than paid internships (n = 92; 30.7%). This implies that unpaid internships were more common among the participants, which can be a result of students limited access to paid options.The majority of respondents were 24 years old (50%), followed by 23 years old (26.7%), while a smaller proportion were 25 years (20%) and 26 years (3.3%).

Regarding academic standing, most students were enrolled in their 6th-7th semester (40%), followed by 4th-5th semester (33.3%), 2nd–3rd semester (15%), and a smaller portion in the 8th semester (11.7%).

In terms of family structure, the highest number of participants reported having 2–3 siblings (60%), whereas 26.7% had 4-5 siblings, and 13.3% had 0-1 sibling.

The CGPA distribution shows that a significant portion of students had a high CGPA (3.1-3.5) representing 33.3% of the sample, followed by moderate CGPA (2.6-3.0) with 30%, very high CGPA (3.6-4.0) with 20%, and low CGPA (2.0-2.5) with 16.7%.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics and Reliability Co-efficient (α) of Scales (N=300)

Measures	***K***	**α**	**Actual Range**		**Potential Range**		**Mean**	**SD**	**Skew.**	**Kurt.**
			Min	**Max**	**Min**	**Max**				
IE	24	.975	47.00	112.00	24	120	89.28	19.87	-1.00	-0.80
PS	30	.988	60.00	107.00	30	150	69.90	15.75	1.15	-0.54
PD	8	.973	22.00	40.00	8	40	39.41	2.51	-1.203	2.987
CD	20	.920	86.00	100.00	20	100	97.83	3.80	-1.38	0.31

Note. IE = Internship Experience Scale, PS = Perceived Stress Scale, PD=Professional Development Scale, CD = Career Decision Making scale, Skew = Skewness, Kurt = Kurtosis

Table 3 shows the reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha), number of item, and descriptive statistics for internship experience (IE), perceived stress (PS), professional development (PD), and career path clarity (CD). The alpha ratings for each scale ranged from

.920 to .988, showing high levels of internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha values closer to one indicate greater internal reliability, according to Gliem and Gliem (2003).

The 24-item IE scale has a mean score of 89.28 (SD = 19.87) and a Cronbach's alpha of .975 indicating strong internal consistency. The 30-item PS scale had a mean score of 69.90 (SD = 15.75) and a reliability of .988. The 8-item PD scale yielded a high mean score of 39.41 (SD = 2.51) and an alpha of .973. Lastly, the 20-item CD scale had a mean score of 97.83 (SD = 3.80) and an alpha of .920, indicating high reliability.

The data was considered normally distributed because the skewness and kurtosis values remained within acceptable ranges. Kline (2016) states that kurtosis should be less than 10 and skewness should be less than 3. Skewness and kurtosis in this study ranged from -1.38 to 1.15 and -0.80 to 2.99, respectively, indicating no substantial deviation from normality.

Table 3

Correlation Coefficient between Internship Experience, Professional Development, Career Decision Making and Perceived Stress (N=300)

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Internship Experience	-	.388**	.956**	-.984**
2. Professional Development		-	-.444**	-.411**
3. Career Decision Making			-	-.972**
4. Perceived Stress				-

*Note: P= * < .05, ** < .01*

Table 4 shows the Pearson correlation coefficients for the four main research variables: internship experience, perceived stress, professional development, and career decision making clarity. There were several statistically significant correlations observed, showing that the constructs under investigation are substantially related. There was a high positive correlation between internship experience and career decision making (r =.956, p <.01), indicating that students who have had more internships are likely to have more clarity when making professional decisions. Likewise, there was a moderate positive correlation between internship experience and professional development (r =.388, p <.01), suggesting that internships contribute to students professional development.

In contrast, Internship Experience showed a significant negative correlation with Perceived Stress (r = -.984, p <.01), indicating that students with more extensive internship experiences reported lower stress levels. Additionally, there was a negative correlation between perceived stress and professional development (r = -.411, p <.01), suggesting that people who

were more professionally developed were less stressed. Additionally, there was a significant negative correlation between Career Decision Making and Perceived Stress (r = -.972, p <.01), supporting the idea that students who are more confident in their career path experience less anxiety or uncertainty.

Overall, the correlation pattern shows that internship experience is critical for improving professional development and career clarity while lowering stress levels. Furthermore, Perceived Stress appears to be inversely related to positive academic and professional outcomes in this sample.

Table 4

Simple Linear Regression showing Internship Experience as Predicator Of Professional Development (N=300)

Predictors	**B**	**SE**	β	**t**	**p**
Constant	35.034	0.617		56.825	.001
Internship Experience	0.049	0.007	.388	7.265	.001

Note. R = .388; R² = .151; B = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error; β = standardized beta; t = t-statistic; p = significance level.

Table 5 shows the results of a linear regression analysis conducted to investigate the effect of internship experience (IET) on professional development (PDT). The findings show that IET and PDT have a significant positive relationship (β =.388, p <.001). The R^2 value of .150 suggests that 15% of the variance in professional development scores can be explained by the internship experience variable, F(1, 298) = 52.784, p < .001.

The unstandardized coefficient (B =.049) shows that for every one unit increase in

Internship Experience, there is a predicted rise of 0.049 units in Professional Development, assuming all else remains equal. These findings support the idea that increased internship exposure helps students professional growth significantly.

Table 5

Simple Linear Regression showing Internship Experience as Predicator of Career Decision Making (N=300)

Predictors	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	81.499	0.297		274.440	.001
Internship Experience	0.183	.003	.956	56.337	.001

Note. R = .956; R^2 = .914 B = unstandardized coefficient, SE = standard error, β = standardized beta, t = t-statistic, p = significance level

Table 6 shows the results of a linear regression analysis predicting the effect of internship experience on career decision making among university students (N = 300). A statistically significant overall model (p <.001) suggests that internship experience is a powerful predictor of career decision making.

The regression coefficient for internship experience was B = 0.183 (SE = 0.003), with a standardized beta (β) of.956, indicating a significant positive relationship between internship experience and career decision making. This suggests that for every one unit increase in internship experience, career decision making increases by 0.183 units, assuming all other factors remain unchanged.

The t-value (t = 56.337, p <.001) indicates that internship experience significantly

influences career decisions experience as an important factor in influencing students clarity and confidence in career related decisions.

Table 6

Moderation analysis of perceived stress in Relationship between internship experience and professional development (N=300)

Predictors	B	SE	t	P	LL	UL
Constant	69.861	7.880	8.865	.001	54.352	85.370
Internship Experience (IET)	-0.390	0.108	-3.594	.001	-0.604	-0.176
Perceived Stress (PST)	-0.437	0.102	-4.266	.001	-0.638	-0.235
IET × PST (Interaction)	0.0059	0.001	3.189	.001	0.002	0.009

*Note. 95%CI, p < .001, p < .01, B = Unstandardized Coefficient, SE = Standard Error, LL = Low*er Level Confidence Interval, *UL* = Upper Level Confidence Interval.

Main Effect of Predictor. Internship experience and professional development had a significant impact at the mean level of perceived stress (B = -0.3905, t = -3.59, p <.001, 95% BCa CI [-0.6043, -0.1767). This shows that, when perceived stress is controlled, higher internship experience alone is linked with a slight reduction in professional development

Main Effect of Moderator. There was a significant relationship between perceived stress and professional development at the internship level (B = -0.4371, t = -4.27, p <.001, 95% BCa

CI [-0.6388, -0.2355]). This suggests that students who have higher levels of perceived stress also have lower levels of professional development.

Interaction. Professional development was significantly predicted by the interaction of internship experience and perceived stress (B = 0.0059, t = 3.19, p =.0016, 95% BCa CI [0.0023, 0.0095]). This suggests the relationship between internship experience and professional development is influenced by perceived stress. Particularly, under higher stress, internship experience becomes more positively associated with professional development, showing that stress increases the positive impact of internships on student growth.

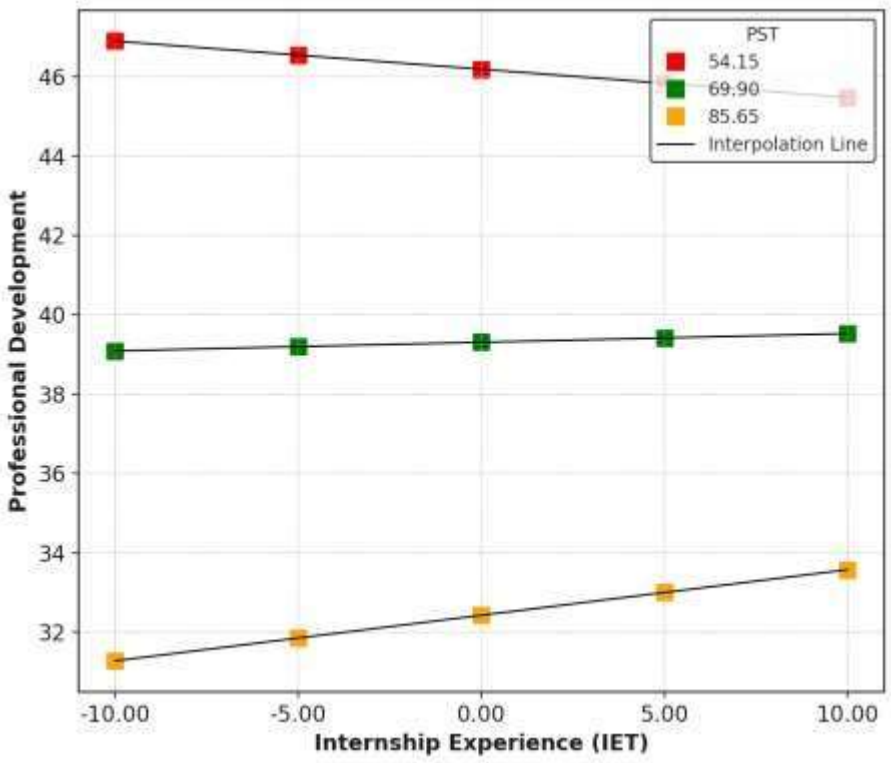

Table 7

Moderation analysis of perceived stress in Relationship between internship experience and career decision making (N=300)

Predictors	B	SE	t	P	LL	UL
Constant	129.943	2.723	47.726	.001	124.585	135.302
Internship Experience (IE)	-0.357	0.038	-9.516	.001	-0.431	-0.283
Perceived Stress	-0.554	0.035	-15.638	.001	-0.623	-0.484
IET × PST (Interaction)	0.007	0.001	10.157	.001	0.005	0.008

Note. 95%CI, p < .001, *p* < .01, *B* = Unstandardized Coefficient, *SE* = Standard Error, *LL* = Lower Level Confidence Interval, *UL* = Upper Level Confidence Interval.

Main Effect of Predictor. Internship experience had significant effects on career decision making at the average level of perceived stress (B = -0.357, t = -9.52, p <.001, 95% CI [-0.431, -0.283]). This shows when perceived stress is controlled, higher internship experience alone is linked with a slight reduction in career path clarity

Main Effect of the Moderator. There was a significant relationship between perceived stress and career decision making at the average internship experience level (B = -0.554, t = -15.64, p <.001, 95% CI [-0.623, -0.484]). This suggests that students who experience higher levels of perceived stress are associated with lower career decision making abilities

Interaction. Perceived stress and internship experience substantially influenced career decision making (B = 0.007, t = 10.16, p <.001, 95% CI [0.005, 0.008]). This shows that the impact of internship experience on career decisions depends on the level of perceived stress. When stress levels are high, internship experience becomes more significantly and positively connected with career decision making, demonstrating that perceived stress has a moderating effect.

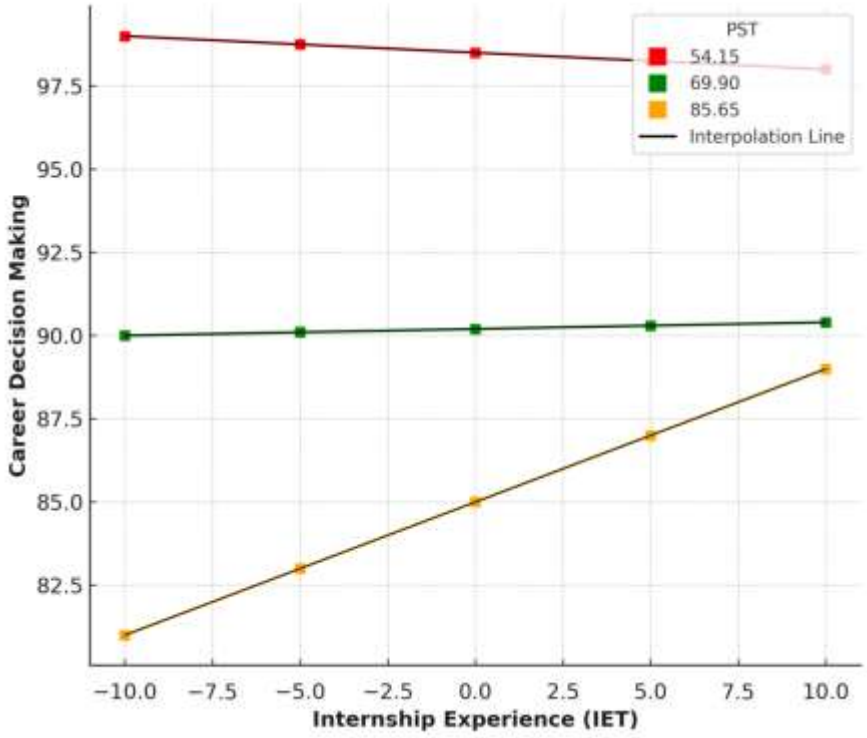

Table 8

Mean, Standard Deviations and t-values along Internship type on Variables (300)

Variables	Paid (n=90)		Unpaid (n=210)		T	P	95% CI		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL	
Internship Experience	89.50	20.00	89.40	19.85	0.044	.965	-4.82	5.04	0.01
Perceived stress	70.00	15.65	69.90	15.80	0.058	.954	-3.79	4.02	0.01
Professional Development	39.50	2.10	39.40	2.85	0.315	.753	-0.53	0.73	0.04
Career Decision Making`	98.60	3.65	97.20	3.75	2.81	.005	0.41	2.39	0.38

Note. M = Mean, *SD* = Standard deviation, *LL* = Lower limit, *UL* = Upper limit, *CI* = Confidence interval

Table 9 shows the findings of an independent samples t-test used to compare paid and unpaid interns on internship experience, perceived stress, professional development, and career decision making.

The Analysis shows that only Career Decision making had a statistically significant mean difference (t (298) = 2.81, p <.01), with paid interns outperforming unpaid interns. Results for Perceived Stress (t (298) = 0.058, p >.05), Professional Development (t(298) = 0.315, p >.05), and Internship Experience (t(298) = 0.044, p >.05) are not statistically significant, suggesting that there is not a significant difference between groups for these variables.

Table 9

Mean, Standard Deviations and t-values along Gender on Variables (N=300)

Variables	Male (n=150)		Female (n=150)		T	P	95% CI		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL	
Internship Experience	87.08	20.43	91.44	19.12	-1.91	.057	-8.86	0.13	-0.22
Perceived Stress	68.20	15.34	72.70	14.98	-2.29	.023	-8.40	-0.61	-0.27
Professional Development	39.46	2.40	39.35	2.61	0.39	.700	-0.46	0.68	0.05
Career Decision Making	97.45	4.02	98.19	3.54	-1.69	.091	-1.60	0.12	-0.19

Note. M = Mean, *SD* = Standard deviation, *LL* = Lower limit, *UL* = Upper limit, *CI*=Confidence interval

Table 10 shows the results of an independent samples t-test conducted to examine differences between male and female participants on Internship experience, professional development, career decision making, and perceived stress Analysis shows that, only perceived stress differs substantially between genders, with female students (M = 72.70) reporting higher stress levels than male students (M = 68.20), t(298) = -2.29, p =.023, d = -0.27. The findings show that the mean differences for Internship Experience, Professional Development, or Career Decision making, are not statistically significant. This implies that there are no variations in these factors by gender.

Table 10

Mean, Standard Deviations and F-value along Faculties on Variables (N=300)

Variables	Social Sciences (n=98)		Computing and IT (n=47)		Business administration (n=51)		Media and Communication (n=54)		Art and Design (n=50)		*F*	*P*	η2
	M	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**			
IE	91.20	18.50	86.70	19.90	94.90	17.00	84.30	21.10	92.40	18.60	3.26	.013	0.042
PS	69.90	15.40	71.50	16.20	70.80	15.80	73.40	14.50	69.30	15.10	1.14	.338	0.015
PD	39.50	2.70	39.80	2.50	39.30	2.40	39.10	2.90	39.70	2.60	0.47	.757	0.006
CD	98.40	3.50	97.20	3.90	98.60	3.60	97.80	4.20	98.00	3.70	0.82	.512	0.011

Note: M=Mean, SD=Standard deviation, f= degree of freedom, p= significant level, η2= eta squared, IE=Internship Experience, PS=Perceived Stress, PD=Professional Development, CD=Career Decision Making

Table 11 shows the results of a one way ANOVA that examined differences in internship experience, perceived stress, professional development, and career decision making across five faculties: social sciences, computing and IT, business administration, media and communication, and art and design. The analysis shows a significant difference only in Internship Experience, $F(4, 295) = 3.26$, $p = .013$, $\eta^2 = .042$, demonstrating that students internship experience scores differ across faculties.

The differences in perceived stress, professional development, and career decision making were not statistically significant (p >.05), implying that these aspects are similar independent of faculty

Table no 11

Post Hoc Test (Gabriel Method) for Investigating Multiple Comparisons with respect to Faculties (N = 300)

Variable	(I) Faculty	(J) Faculty	(I-J)	MD (I-J)	*p*	95% CI	
						LL	UL
Internship Experience	Business Administration	Art and Design	2<5	2.50	0.04	0.12	4.88
	Business Administration	Media and Communication	2<4	3.20	0.02	0.54	5.86

*Note. *p < .05*

Table 12 shows the post hoc test for examining multiple comparisons regarding the faculties of participants. The findings show a significant difference in internship experience scores between students from the faculty of Business Administration and Art and Design (p = .04), and between Business Administration and Media and Communication (p = .02). These results indicate that students from the faculty of Business Administration reported significantly higher internship experience compared to those from Art and Design and Media and Communication.

Discussion

Chapter 4

Discussion

The present study was conducted to investigate the impact of internship experience on professional development and career decision making among final year university students, with perceived stress as a moderating variable. The constructs were measured using the Internship Experience Scale, Professional Development Scale, Career Decision Making Self Efficacy Scale, and the Perceived Stress Questionnaire. Statistical analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0.

Descriptive statistics were computed to analyze the demographic characteristics of the participants. Reliability analysis indicated that all instruments were internally consistent and reliable measures of the study variables. Pearson Product Correlation was used to examine the relationship among internship experience, professional development, career decision making self efficacy and perceived stress. Independent Sample t-tests and One-Way ANOVA were conducted to assess differences in variables based on demographic factors. Additionally, Hayes Process Macro was used to analyze the moderating role of perceived stress in the relationship between internship experience and both professional development and career decision making self efficacy.

The results of the first objective supported Hypothesis 1, which stated that internship experience improves the professional growth of final year university students. Simple linear regression analysis was used to verify this hypothesis, and the results showed that internship experience and professional development were positively correlated in a statistically significant way ($\beta = .388$, $p < .001$), with an R2 value of.151 (see Table 5). This suggests that higher levels of

professional development were displayed by students who had more varied and interesting internship experiences. In other words, internship exposure explained 15.1% of the variance in students professional development scores

The findings of the present study are consistent with prior research highlighting the importance of internship experiences in enhancing students professional development. For instance, Sadia Anjum (2020) conducted a large scale study on 800 business students from Pakistan and found that internship programs had a significant positive impact on both professional and personal development. The study emphasized that internships provide students with an opportunity to apply classroom knowledge to real world contexts, enhance their skills, and foster professional growth. These results align with the present findings that demonstrate internship experience as a key predictor of professional development

Similarly findings of Gault, and Duey (2010) provide strong support for the hypothesis that internship experience enhances professional development. Their study demonstrated that students who completed business internships were perceived by employers as more confident, and skilled in practical workplace tasks. Employers reported that interns were better equipped to handle job responsibilities, adapt to professional environments, and demonstrate initiative and professionalism

Theoretically, this relationship is consistent with Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984), which holds that learning happens best when people go through a cycle of active experimentation, abstract conceptualization, reflective observation, and active experimentation. This type of experiential learning is provided by internships, where students learn by performing, evaluate their performance, and use the input to improve their behavior going forward.

The second hypotheses of the study was also supported by the results which examined whether internship experience improves career decision making clarity among final year

university students. To test this hypothesis, a simple linear regression was used. Table 6 shows that internship experience positively predicts career decision making clarity (B = 0.183, SE=.003, β =.956, t = 56.337, p <.001). A strong correlation between the two variables is indicated by the high beta value, which implies that students who have more fulfilling internship experiences typically make more informed judgments about their careers.

The study by Wasi and Lodhi (2015) provides evidence supporting the hypothesis that internship experiences enhance career clarity. Their research, conducted among university students in Karachi, Pakistan, found that internships significantly improved students exposure to real world work situations, skill development, and overall career awareness.the study highlighted that internships helped students better understand potential career options and prepare for professional roles, indicating that participation in internships plays a critical role in clarifying career pathways and guiding informed career decision making

Similarly, Wang (2021) explored the relationship between internship experience and career decision-making self-efficacy among hospitality students. The study found that meaningful internship experiences directly enhanced students self efficacy in making career decisions, thereby improving their career decision making clarity. Collectively, these findings confirm that structured and well designed internships play a crucial role in helping final year students make informed and confident career choices.

The third hypothesis stated that perceived stress improves the association between internship experience and professional development among final year university students. This hypothesis was validated by the moderation analysis results. Perceived stress strengthens the positive relationship between internship experience and professional development, as seen by the

statistically significant interaction term between internship experience and perceived stress (B = 0.0059, p <.01) in Table 7.

This suggests that students who reported higher levels of perceived stress during their internships made greater progress in professional development than those who reported lower levels of stress. According to Selye (1974), these results are consistent with the idea of eustress, which is a type of healthy stress that can improve motivation, concentration, and development. Final year students may perform better, participate more actively in tasks, and adjust more rapidly when they are exposed to moderate levels of stress in a structured internship setting. This could result in improved professional progress.

According to a study published by Gulsum and Emirza 2025 under the title "The effect of stress perceived in clinical practice on professional behavior in nursing students: a correlational and descriptive study," nursing students who experienced more stress during clinical practice also exhibited better professional behaviors. The researchers hypothesized that stress, when perceived positively and managed properly, can drive students to participate more actively in professional responsibilities and learning activities.

The fourth hypotheses proposed that perceived stress positively moderates the relationship between internship experience and the career decision making clarity among final year university students,

The moderation analysis results validated this hypothesis. The interaction term between internship experience and perceived stress was found to be significant (B = 0.007, SE = 0.001, t = 10.157, p =.001), with a confidence interval of 0.005 to 0.008.

According to this statistically significant and favorable interaction effect, the beneficial impact of internship experience on the clarity of career decision making also grows as perceived stress rises.

This shows that internship experiences may help students with higher levels of stress make more informed career decisions. This interpretation is confirmed by Kamath and Baruah (2023) A study titled "Academic Stress and Career Decision Making among Adolescents" found a significant positive relationship. This implies that students who are under more academic stress are more likely than those who are not to make thoughtful and well informed choices regarding their careers. The results suggest that stress can be a motivating factor that encourages students to think more deeply about their future choices and professional interests when it is considered as a challenge rather than a threat.

The fifth hypothesis suggested that Final year students who completed paid internships exhibit higher career decision making clarity than those who completed unpaid internships. This theory was validated by the findings. With a t-value of 3.75 and a p-value of.005, Table 9 demonstrates that students who completed paid internships (M = 98.60, SD = 3.65) and those who completed unpaid internships (M = 97.20, SD = 3.75) had statistically significant differences in their career decision making scores. This difference is significant at the 0.01 level.

According to Cohen's d = 0.38, the effect size indicates a minor to moderate practical significance, indicating that the difference has practical importance as well. These findings show that students who get paid for their internship did marginally better in terms of career clarity, which could be attributed to improved motivation, perceived value of the experience, and financial security.

This aligns with previous research McHugh (2017) emphasized that paid internships lead to higher internship efficacy, stronger supervision, and more meaningful work experiences, all of which promote career related decision making. Paid interns are more likely than unpaid interns to receive job offers, start with higher starting salaries, and exhibit better confidence in

their career choices, according to extensive surveys by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2020; 2022). All things considered, these results imply that paid internships improve the overall quality of the internship experience, giving students more clarity about their careers and preparedness for the workforce.

The sixth hypothesis which is Female students report significantly higher levels of perceived stress compared to male students is supported by the study's findings. With a t-value of -2.29 and a p-value of.023, Table 10 demonstrates that the mean perceived stress score of female students (M = 72.70, SD = 14.98) was significantly higher than that of male students (M = 68.20, SD = 15.34). According to the statistically significant result ($p < .05$), female students are more stressed than those of males. The Cohen's d = -0.27 indicates that the effect magnitude is minimal to moderate.

These findings are in accordance with earlier research conducted on a large scale study on Turkish university students. Compared to male university students, female students are more likely to report higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Bayram and Bilgel, 2008). In a similar vein, Misra and McKean (2000) discovered that female students experience higher levels of academic stress, especially in relation to managing their workload and time constraints.

The seventh hypothesis which is that business students report higher score on internship experience than other faculties was confirmed by the results, which showed a statistically significant difference in internship experience between faculties ($F(4, 295) = 3.26$, $p = .013$, $\eta^2 = 0.042$) according to the One-Way ANOVA (see Table 11). This suggests that depending on their academic field, students exposure to internships differed significantly.

A post hoc Gabriel test (Table 12) was used to investigate these differences further. According to the findings, students from the Business Administration faculty had considerably more internship experience score than students from the Media and Communication (MD =

3.20, p =.02) and Art and Design (MD = 2.50, p =.04) departments. This is consistent with previous study, by Sadia Anjum (2020) who examined business student's internship experiences in Pakistan. The results showed that taking part in internship programs significantly improved abilities, job preparation, and career awareness while also having an impact on personal growth.

Limitation and suggestion

When evaluating the relationship between internship experience, professional development, career decision making, and perceived stress, certain limitations should be considered.

The study was conducted in Islamabad, Pakistan, which may restrict the generalizability of findings to students from other regions future research ought to consider about gathering participants who have a variety of geographical backgrounds.

This research employed a quantitative design, which focused on numerical data and statistical relationships. However, a qualitative approach (e.g., interviews or focus groups) could provide deeper insights into students personal experiences, emotions, and challenges during internships. Future studies could adopt a mixed-method design to capture both measurable outcomes and subjective experiences.

Although perceived stress was investigated as a moderating variable, the study did not take into consideration other factors that could influence students career growth such as peer influence, academic pressure, or family support. Future studies could offer a more thorough knowledge of the factors influencing students' transition from university to the workforce by including such variables.

Implications

The present study explores the moderating role of perceived stress while emphasizing the influence of internship experiences on professional development and career decision making clarity among final year university students. These findings add significant value to the existing literature on, experiential learning, and student mental health.

This study is important for educational institutions and university officials because it

demonstrates that well designed internships, even when difficult, can considerably boost student's professional growth and future career clarity particularly when accompanied by tolerable level of stress.

The study emphasizes the necessity of training students to deal with real world pressures in constructive ways that promote resilience and decision making confidence.

Career counselors and psychologists can use these ideas to create assistance programs that help students view stress as a possible motivation rather than a negative force. Resilience building, stress management training, and reflective learning techniques can be incorporated into student support services to assist individuals get the most out of their internships.

Institutional internship practices can benefit greatly from the data of paid versus unpaid internships. Wherever possible, offering paid opportunities could help students become more motivated and clear about their career goals, especially among economically diverse student populations. Internship environment should encourage positive challenges that foster growth, while avoiding excessive demands that may overwhelm students.

Conclusion

Internship experiences have a substantial impact on final year university student's professional development, particularly during transitional times such as career decision making. The purpose of this study was to investigate how internship experiences affect students professional growth and career path clarity, as well as the moderating effect of perceived stress. A structured survey was used to gather information from 300 final year students in Islamabad, Pakistan, who had completed at least one internship and were purposefully chosen.

The findings revealed that students who had more meaningful internship experiences had greater professional development and better career decision making skills. Additionally, these associations were moderated by perceived stress, with a higher level of stress apparently amplifying the benefits of internship experiences. This implies that a reasonable level of stress may actually encourage increased motivation, focus, and flexibility in demanding but structured setting. Interestingly, students with paid internships showed greater career clarity than those with unpaid internships, indicating that financial incentive may improve student's motivation, engagement, and sense of purpose in their chosen fields like internships. These findings contribute to a better understanding of how real world experiences and internal psychological factors interact to determine important developmental outcomes.

The findings of this study can help universities, internship providers, and career counselors build more effective programs.

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Annexures

Annexure A

Inform Consent

Dear Participant,

You are being invited to participate in a study being conducted by a researcher of MS Clinical Psychology at International Islamic University Islamabad. This study aims to explore the Impact of internship experience on professional development and career path clarity: Moderating role of perceived stress among final year university students. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw your consent at any time. All information collected during the study would be kept confidential and anonymous, and will be used solely for the purpose of this study.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Researcher,

Anoshia Shakil

Email: Anoshia.msep359@ student.iiu.edu.pk

Annexure B

Demographic Sheet

Name (Optional) _____

Age: _____

Gender: Male/Female

Faculty/Department: _____

Semester: _____

No. Siblings: _____

Birth Order: First/Middle/Last/Only Born

Marital Status: Single/Married

Program Type: Graduate/Undergraduate

Internship Type: Paid/Unpaid

CGPA: _____

Annexure C

Internship Experience Scale (IES)

For each question provide your level of agreement with statement reflecting your Internship experiences. Rate your agreement with the following statements. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

1 Strongly Disgree	2 Agree	3 Neutral	4 Disagree	5 Strongly Agree

1	I was given own projects to work on.	1	2	3	4	5
2	I had the chance to apply theoretical concepts, learned by me in college, in my work	1	2	3	4	5
3	I was satisfied with the work assignments I had during my Internship	1	2	3	4	5
4	My internship required me to use a number of complex or high-level skills.	1	2	3	4	5
5	My internship provided me the chance to completely finish the pieces of work I began	1	2	3	4	5
6	The actual work itself provided clues about how well I am doing during my internship	1	2	3	4	5
7	I really liked the organization that I did my internship with.	1	2	3	4	5
8	I was treated on the same professional level as the other Employees	1	2	3	4	5
9	My internship supervisor was easy to approach and always willing to answer questions.	1	2	3	4	5
10	Site supervisors often let me know how well they thought I have performed on my job.	1	2	3	4	5
11	My site supervisor was a good professional model for me.	1	2	3	4	5

12	My site supervisor shared his/her personal experiences to give me an alternative perspective to my problems.	1	2	3	4	5
13	I would like to work in a regular position for my internship organisation	1	2	3	4	5
14	I often volunteered for tasks at my workplace	1	2	3	4	5
15	I proactively asked questions from my supervisor	1	2	3	4	5
16	I took the initiative to get acquainted with other employees	1	2	3	4	5
17	I proactively asked for feedback during internship	1	2	3	4	5
18	As a result of this internship I am better prepared to enter the working world	1	2	3	4	5
19	I feel I can get a good reference from this organization.	1	2	3	4	5
20	I would like to work in the same field in which my internship organisation / institution operates.	1	2	3	4	5
21	I now feel more confident in finding a job upon graduation	1	2	3	4	5
22	The results of my work significantly affect the lives and well-being of other people.	1	2	3	4	5
23	My internship taught me a lot of things that I would never have been able to learn in the classroom	1	2	3	4	5
24	I had learned a lot about the people and communication skills through my internship experience.	1	2	3	4	5

Annexure D

Professional Development Scale (PDS)

Provide your level of agreement with statements reflecting your professional development experiences

1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Somewhat Disagree	4 Neutral	5 Somewhat agree	6 Agree	7 Strongly Agree

1	I have everything necessary for the completion of my work skills	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2	My boss has already made compliments about my development as a professional.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3	I have had a significant professional development since I started working.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4	I think that my performance has improved as a Professional	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5	My colleagues rave about my professional growth.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6	With my current knowledge, I can do my job satisfactorily.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

7	I have become a more qualified professional.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	Currently, I feel well prepared to undertake activities that are meant for me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Annexure E

Perceived Stress Questionnaire (PSQ)

For each sentence mark the option that describe how often it applies to you in general, during the last year or two.

1 Almost	2 Sometimes	3 Often	4 Usually

1	You feel rested	1	2	3	4
2	You feel that too many demands are being made on you	1	2	3	4
3	You are irritable or grouchy	1	2	3	4
4	You have too many things to do	1	2	3	4
5	You feel lonely or isolated	1	2	3	4
6	You find yourself in situation of Conflict	1	2	3	4
7	You feel you are doing things you really like	1	2	3	4
8	You feel tired	1	2	3	4
9	You fear you may not manage to attain your goals	1	2	3	4
10	You feel calm	1	2	3	4
11	You have too many decisions to Make	1	2	3	4
12	You feel frustrated	1	2	3	4
13	You are full of energy	1	2	3	4
14	You feel tense	1	2	3	4
15	Your problem seems to be piling up	1	2	3	4
16	You feel you are in hurry	1	2	3	4
17	You feel safe and protected	1	2	3	4
18	You have many worries	1	2	3	4
19	You are under pressure from other peoples	1	2	3	4
20	You feel discouraged	1	2	3	4
21	You enjoy yourself	1	2	3	4
22	You are afraid for the future	1	2	3	4

23	You feel you are doing things because you have to not because you want to	1	2	3	4
24	You feel criticized or judged	1	2	3	4
25	You are lighthearted	1	2	3	4
26	You feel mentally exhausted	1	2	3	4
27	You have trouble relaxing	1	2	3	4
28	You feel loaded down with Responsibility	1	2	3	4
29	You have enough time for Yourself	1	2	3	4
30	You feel under pressure from Deadlines	1	2	3	4

Annexure F

Career Decision Making Self Efficacy Scale (CDMSES)

Indicate how confident you are in completing the following tasks (0 = No Confidence, 9 = Complete Confidence)

0 None	1	2 Very Little	3	4 Some	5	6 Much	7	8	9 Complete

How much confidence do you have that you could

1	Determine the steps to take if you are having academic trouble with an aspect of your chosen major	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
2	Accurately assess your Abilities	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
3	List several occupations that you are interested in	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
4	Choose a career that will fit your preferred lifestyle	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
5	Talk to a faculty member in department you are considering for major	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
6	Change occupation if you are not satisfied with the one you enter	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
7	Decide what you value most in an Occupation	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
8	Ask a faculty member about graduate schools and job opportunities in your major	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
9	Get involved in a work experience relevant to your future goals	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	Choose a major or career that will fit your interests	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

11	Decide whether or not you will need to attend graduate or professional school to achieve your career goals	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
12	Choose a major or career that will suit your abilities	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
13	Plan course work outside of your major that will help you in your future career	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
14	Identify some reasonable major or career alternatives if you are unable to get	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
15	Figure out what you are and you are not ready to sacrifice to achieve your career goals	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
16	Talk with a person already employed in the field you are interested in	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
17	Choose the best major for you even if it took longer to finish your college degree	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
18	Identify employers firms institutions relevant to your career possibilities	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
19	Find information about graduate or professional Schools	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
20	Successfully manage the job interview process	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9