

## EMPLOYER REQUIREMENTS FOR FINANCE GRADUATES: IDENTIFYING KEY EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS THROUGH INTERNSHIP RELATED INSIGHTS

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### ABSTRACT

Internships serve as a critical stepping stone for finance undergraduates, bridging the gap between academic knowledge and the dynamic demands of the professional world. As employers seek graduates equipped with industry relevant competencies, internship programs provide students with first hand exposure to financial operations, decision-making processes, and problem-solving in real world scenarios. Research has consistently highlighted the role of internships in enhancing employability by fostering essential skills that go beyond the classroom such as analytical thinking, adaptability, and proficiency in financial tools. However, the landscape of internships has undergone a significant transformation, particularly with the disruptions caused by the COVID 19 pandemic. Organizations have shifted towards remote internship models, emphasizing the importance of digital literacy and the ability to collaborate effectively in virtual environments. This evolution has reshaped employer expectations, making technological proficiency and resilience key attributes for aspiring finance professionals. This study aims to identify the most valued employability skills for finance students, focusing on UiTM undergraduate BBA (Finance) interns. Through descriptive statistical analysis, the research examines the employability skills required in today's financial sector, the most frequently used Microsoft Office programs, and additional software applications essential in the workplace. By uncovering these insights, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how internships shape finance graduates into competitive candidates ready to meet evolving industry needs

**Keywords:** Employability Skills, Internship Programs, Finance Graduates, Employer's Expectation, Digital Literacy

### INTRODUCTION

In today's rapidly evolving global economy, employers place increasing emphasis on the need for university graduates to possess not only up-to-date academic knowledge but also a well-rounded set of soft and hard skills. For finance students, this includes technical competencies

such as financial analysis, data interpretation, and proficiency in financial software, alongside soft skills like communication, adaptability, and teamwork. Academic internship programs serve as a vital bridge between theoretical learning and practical application, offering students the opportunity to gain real world experience in a structured and supervised environment.

Internships have become a critical component of higher education, especially in business and finance programs. They allow students to apply classroom knowledge in professional settings, develop industry-relevant skills, and build networks that may lead to future employment. The traditional view of internships as clerical or administrative roles has shifted significantly. Today, interns are often entrusted with meaningful responsibilities such as contributing to financial reports, supporting investment analysis, and even participating in strategic planning initiatives.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted education and employment worldwide, further highlighted the importance of adaptability and digital readiness among graduates. Many students had to complete their internships remotely, requiring them to demonstrate self discipline, digital communication skills, and the ability to work independently. Despite these challenges, some students not only completed their internships successfully but were also offered full-time positions.

Given these developments, it is essential to understand what specific employability skills employers seek in finance graduates. This study aims to identify the key skills valued by employers, with a particular focus on BBA (Finance) undergraduates from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), to help align academic programs with industry expectations and enhance graduate employability.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Internships serve as a critical bridge between academic learning and professional practice, offering students the opportunity to cultivate essential skills that enhance both their academic performance and career readiness. These programs not only help students present themselves effectively to potential employers but also encourage introspection regarding their academic journeys and how these experiences shape their personal and professional development. As the nature of work continues to evolve particularly with the rise of remote internships students

must be equipped with a blend of academic knowledge and industry-relevant skills. Adaptability and digital literacy have become indispensable, and whether in physical or virtual settings, internships are pivotal in preparing students for seamless integration into the workforce. This literature review explores the core employability skills required during internship programs, emphasizing the competencies necessary to thrive in diverse professional environments and meet employer expectations.

Employability skills are broadly defined as the capabilities that enable individuals to function effectively in the workplace. [1] has categorized these into soft and hard skills, both of which are essential for professional success. Soft skills, as highlighted by [10], are particularly crucial for interns as they navigate new environments and engage with colleagues and clients. These include communication abilities, interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, and personality traits such as resilience and adaptability. Such competencies not only facilitate smoother transitions into professional settings but also enhance the effectiveness of technical or hard skills.

The importance of soft skills is further reinforced by [7] who conducted a cross-national study across Spain, Poland, and Thailand to identify the most valued 21st-century employability skills. Their findings emphasized the significance of generic competencies like novel and adaptive thinking, resilience, and resourcefulness. Social and managerial skills emerged as particularly vital, while IT-related competencies gained increasing relevance from 2020 to 2024, reflecting the digital transformation of workplaces. Interestingly, traditional indicators such as work experience and formal education were deemed less critical, suggesting a shift in employer priorities toward more dynamic and transferable skills.

Building on this, [4] employed exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to identify a ten-factor structure of key employability competencies. Their study underscored the growing importance of digital literacy for long-term career success, followed by foundational business knowledge and essential behavioural traits. These findings align with the broader trend of prioritizing adaptability and continuous learning in response to rapidly changing job markets and technological advancements.

The perspectives of students themselves also provide valuable insights into employability skill development. [5] found that business students ranked communication, learning agility, positive

attitudes, and problem solving as the most critical skills for employability. While students expressed confidence in their teamwork and academic abilities, they acknowledged the need for improvement in creativity and conflict resolution. A subsequent study by [6] echoed these findings, but also highlighted a disconnect between student self assessment and employer expectations. Employers noted deficiencies in perseverance, initiative, and risk taking traits that are increasingly valued in dynamic work environments.

In the context of specific disciplines, such as accounting, the skill requirements become even more nuanced. [2] emphasized that accounting graduates must be not only proficient in technical areas like accounting and business but also adaptable, tech savvy, and capable of critical thinking. The integration of ICT skills with traditional accounting knowledge is essential for meeting the demands of a technology driven industry. This underscores the need for a holistic approach to skill development that combines domain specific expertise with broader cognitive and digital competencies.

Earlier research by [5] also contributes to the understanding of essential employability skills. Their study identified teamwork, leadership, technical proficiency, and ethical behaviour as foundational attributes for interns. Additionally, they highlighted the importance of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills such as analytical thinking, decision making, time management, and effective communication. These competencies are not only relevant for internship success but also for long term career development in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

The role of higher education institutions in fostering these skills cannot be overstated. [8] examined how universities can better prepare graduates for the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). They proposed four strategic focus areas: mastering high impact technologies, cultivating entrepreneurial mind sets, enhancing digital skills through targeted training, and achieving a balance between technical and soft skills. These strategies are essential for ensuring that graduates remain competitive and adaptable in a rapidly evolving job market.

In the specific context of finance graduates from UiTM Terengganu, the literature highlights a set of core competencies that are crucial for career success. These include technical proficiency in financial tools and systems, analytical thinking for data driven decision-making, adaptability to changing market conditions, and strong communication skills for stakeholder engagement.

The integration of professional education, hands on training, and industry exposure is vital in equipping graduates with these skills. By aligning academic curricula with industry needs, institutions can enhance the employability outcomes of their students.

In conclusion, the literature consistently emphasizes the multifaceted nature of employability skills, encompassing both soft and hard competencies. As the workplace continues to evolve, particularly with the integration of digital technologies and remote work models, the ability to adapt, learn continuously, and communicate effectively becomes increasingly important. Internship programs, whether physical or remote, serve as critical platforms for developing these skills. For finance graduates from UiTM Terengganu and beyond, a strategic focus on skill development supported by academic institutions and informed by industry expectations will be key to achieving long-term career success.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study utilized secondary data from undergraduate students of BBA (Finance) at UiTM Terengganu who completed industrial training. A structured online survey, designed using Google Forms, explored internship challenges and essential employability skills. Various question formats, including yes/no, multiple choice, Likert scale, and open-ended items, ensured comprehensive insights. Distributed via WhatsApp groups, the survey yielded 143 valid responses. Descriptive statistical methods analyzed the data, identifying key employability skills required and types of Microsoft office used most during the internship. Findings highlighted the alignment between academic preparation and industry expectations, especially in a post pandemic context, offering valuable perspectives on the professional readiness of finance graduates entering the job market

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The study employed descriptive research methods to analyze data in two key areas: respondents' demographic profiles and essential employability skills during internships. A total of 143 BBA (Finance) interns from the Faculty of Business Management, UiTM Dungun Campus, participated. Their responses provided insights into the skills deemed crucial for internship success.

### *Descriptive Analysis*

The demographic data in Table I cover respondents' gender, age, organization type, internship mode, and placement. These details help contextualize their backgrounds and provide insights into employability skills. Understanding these factors aids in interpreting their responses effectively.

Table 1: Respondent Characteristics

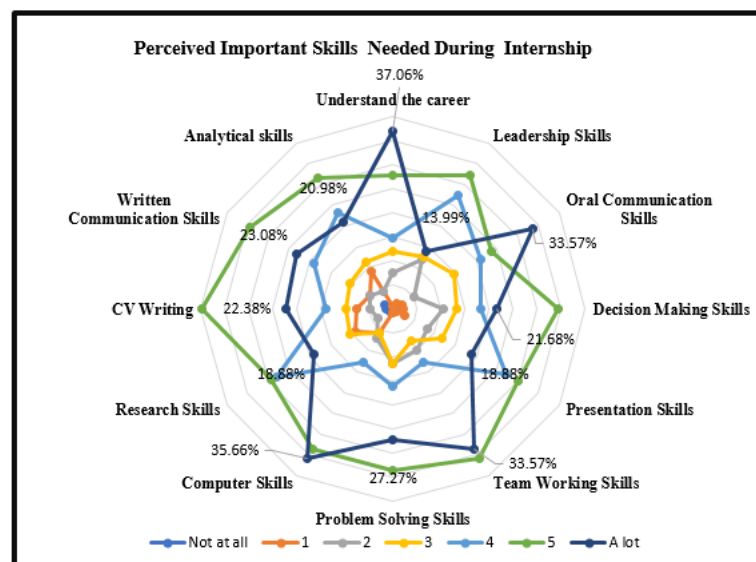
	Frequency	Percentage
<i>1. Gender</i>		
Male	21	14.69%
Female	122	85.31%
<i>2. Age</i>		
21 – 22	20	13.99%
23 – 24	103	72.03%
25 – 26	19	36.36%
> 26	1	0.70%
<i>3. Place of Internship</i>		
Kedah	1	0.70%
Kuala Lumpur	16	11.19%
Negeri Sembilan	1	0.70%
Pahang	43	30.07%
Sabah	2	1.40%
Selangor	9	6.29%
Terengganu	71	49.65%
<i>4. Types of Organisation</i>		
Sole Trader	24	16.78%
Partnership	7	4.90%
Limited Company	9	6.29%
Private Limited Company	28	19.58%
Financial Institutions/Services	16	11.19%
Government Link Companies (GLC)	35	24.48%
Others	24	16.78%
<i>5. Mode Internship</i>		
Work in the office	61	42.66%
Work from Home	8	5.59%
Mixed Mode	74	51.75%
<i>6. Department intern was assigned to</i>		
Finance/Accounting/Purchasing		
Department	102	71.33%
Human Resource Department	4	2.80%
Operation Department	3	2.10%

Marketing/Sales Department	1	0.70%
Rotation (More than one department)	33	23.08%

The demographic profile of finance students undertaking internships at UiTM Terengganu reflects significant trends shaped by their backgrounds and preferences. Female students dominate participation (85.31%), with most interns aged 23–24 (72.03%), indicating that internships are typically pursued in the final stages of study. Many students prefer placements in Terengganu (49.65%) and Pahang (30.07%), aligning with their regional origins for convenience. Government Link Companies (GLCs) (24.48%) and Private Limited Companies (19.58%) are preferred hosts, offering structured environments. Mixed-mode internships (51.75%) balance remote and office work, with Finance/Accounting/Purchasing departments (71.33%) being the primary assignment area, underscoring academic and career relevance.

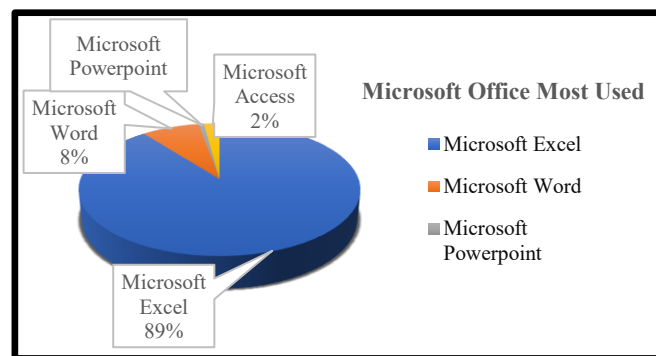
### *Perceived the Importance of Employability Skills during the Internship*

*Figure1: Perceived Important Employability Skills*

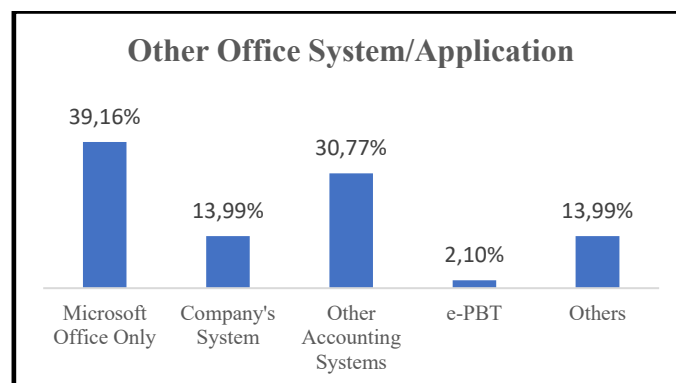


The analysis of employability skills among 143 finance interns at UiTM Terengganu highlights key competencies essential for career success. Career understanding ranked highest (37.06%), emphasizing the need for mentorship and guidance during internships. Computer skills followed closely (35.66%), reflecting the increasing digitalization of finance-related tasks and the importance of financial software proficiency. Oral communication and teamwork (33.57%) emerged as crucial skills for collaboration, networking, and client engagement. Decision making and analytical skills were also highly valued, underscoring their role in evaluating financial data and making informed business decisions. Although presentation skills, written communication, and CV writing ranked lower, they remain significant in professional settings. The differing levels of importance assigned to these skills highlight the need for holistic career development programs integrating technical expertise and interpersonal abilities. This study reinforces the necessity for targeted skill building initiatives that align with industry expectations, ensuring finance interns are well prepared for a dynamic and evolving workforce.



Figure 2: *Microsoft Office Most Used*

The analysis of software usage among finance interns at UiTM Terengganu in Figure 2 highlights Microsoft Excel as the most essential application, with 89% of interns relying on it for financial analysis, data management, and reporting. Excel's dominance underscores its necessity in financial modelling, budgeting, and large dataset organization. Microsoft Word (8%) supports document preparation and professional correspondence, while Microsoft PowerPoint (1%) is mainly used for presentations, indicating limited demand for visual storytelling in finance. Microsoft Access (2%) is employed for database management but is less preferred than Excel.

Figure 3: *Other Office Application/System*

Beyond Microsoft Office, figure 3 further explains that 39.16% of interns exclusively use its applications, while 30.77% engage with accounting systems. Company specific and miscellaneous office systems (13.99% each) highlight workplace adaptability, with e-PBT serving specialized financial management needs.

## DISCUSSION

The findings emphasize the key employability skills and technological tools crucial for finance interns at UiTM Terengganu, offering valuable insights into their professional development. Career understanding, computer skills, teamwork, and oral communication emerge as the most essential competencies, underscoring the importance of both technical expertise and interpersonal abilities in shaping successful careers. Decision-making and analytical skills further highlight the need for critical thinking in finance related roles.

Microsoft Excel stands out as the most widely used tool, reinforcing its significance in financial modelling and data management, while Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and Access serve



supporting roles. Interns also engage with diverse accounting systems such as UBS, SAP, and Wave Accounting, enhancing their familiarity with industry-standard financial software. Exposure to specialized systems broadens their technological capabilities, ensuring adaptability to various workplace environments. Overall, these findings stress the importance of integrating technical and soft skills in finance internships to enhance employability and career readiness in a dynamic financial sector.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study successfully highlights the critical employability skills required for finance graduates, emphasizing both technical competencies and interpersonal abilities necessary for career advancement. Findings reinforce the importance of career understanding, analytical skills, decision-making, teamwork, and oral communication, alongside proficiency in financial systems and Microsoft Office applications. These insights underscore the growing necessity for digital literacy and adaptability in the evolving finance sector, aligning with previous research that emphasizes a balance of technical expertise and soft skills. As the industry moves towards the Fifth Industrial Revolutions, finance professionals must continually develop their IT proficiency, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving capabilities to meet employer expectations. The findings align with research by [2], [8] and [9], highlighting the growing need for digital literacy, adaptability, and soft skills alongside technical expertise as finance industry expectations evolve with technological advancements.

Future research should explore the long-term impact of internships on employability, assessing how practical experience contributes to career progression. Comparative studies across different finance sectors could provide broader insights into industry specific expectations and workforce trends. Additionally, further investigation into external labour market challenges, including economic fluctuations and graduate oversupply, may offer deeper understanding into the barriers affecting employment opportunities for finance graduates.

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