

**Career Readiness Through Voluntary Internships: Undergraduate Student
Perspectives**

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Date: XX of Xxxxxx, 2025

Dear: Dayana Abutalipova

This letter now confirms that your research project titled...

Career Readiness Through Voluntary Internships: Undergraduate Student Perspectives

(a) has been approved by the Graduate School of Education Ethics Committee of Nazarbayev University.

You may proceed with contacting your preferred research site and commencing your participant recruitment strategy.

Yours sincerely ,

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7

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Abstract

Career Readiness Through Voluntary Internships: Undergraduate Student Perspectives

This study explores how undergraduate students in Kazakhstan understand their career readiness after completing voluntary internships. Despite growing interest in work-integrated learning, voluntary internships — those pursued independently by students outside formal degree requirements — remain underexplored, particularly in post-Soviet educational contexts. Eight final-year students from IT and business programmes at a private university in Kazakhstan participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework and interpreted through Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005). Findings indicate that students did not experience career readiness as something fully formed by the end of the internship but described it as a gradual process: becoming less hesitant in workplace situations, confronting the gap between academic knowledge and practical demands, gaining a clearer sense of career direction, and learning to act under unclear expectations. Internship conditions — particularly the availability of supervision, the nature of feedback, emotional climate, and whether the placement was paid — shaped how students engaged with and made sense of these experiences. Notably, negative outcomes such as realising a poor fit with a particular field contributed to career readiness just as meaningfully as positive confirmation of career choice. The study argues that although mandatory internships exist within Kazakhstani university programmes, they do not always provide the depth of professional engagement that students seek, which leads many to pursue voluntary placements as a more meaningful path to workplace preparation. The findings offer a contextual extension of Career Construction Theory by showing that adaptability resources develop simultaneously rather than sequentially when institutional support is limited.

Keywords: career readiness, voluntary internships, work-integrated learning, career construction theory, Kazakhstan, qualitative research, undergraduate students.

Аңдатпа

Готовность к карьере через добровольные стажировки: взгляд студентов бакалавриата

Данное исследование посвящено тому, как студенты бакалавриата в Казахстане оценивают свою готовность к профессиональной деятельности после прохождения добровольных стажировок. Несмотря на растущий интерес к обучению, интегрированному с практикой, добровольные стажировки — те, которые студенты проходят по собственной инициативе, вне рамок обязательных учебных требований — остаются малоизученными, особенно в постсоветском образовательном контексте. В исследовании приняли участие восемь студентов старших курсов IT и бизнес-направлений в университетах Казахстана. Сбор данных осуществлялся посредством полуструктурированных интервью, анализ — с применением тематического анализа по Брауну и Кларку (2006), а интерпретация результатов строилась на основе теории карьерного конструирования Савикаса (2005). Результаты показывают, что студенты не воспринимали готовность к карьере как нечто окончательно сформировавшееся по итогам стажировки, а описывали её как постепенный процесс: снижение неуверенности в рабочих ситуациях, столкновение с разрывом между академическими знаниями и практическими требованиями, постепенное прояснение карьерных ориентиров и умение действовать в условиях неопределённости. Условия стажировки — в частности, доступность наставничества, характер обратной связи, эмоциональная атмосфера и наличие оплаты — во многом определяли то, как студенты осмыслили этот опыт. Показательно, что негативный опыт, например осознание несовместимости с определённой сферой деятельности, вносил не меньший вклад в формирование карьерной готовности, чем подтверждение правильности сделанного выбора. Исследование показывает, что хотя обязательные производственные практики формально предусмотрены в казахстанских университетах, они не всегда

обеспечивают тот уровень профессиональной вовлечённости, который ищут студенты, что и побуждает многих из них обращаться к добровольным стажировкам как к более содержательному способу подготовки к работе. Полученные результаты предлагают контекстуальное расширение теории карьерного конструирования, демонстрируя, что в условиях ограниченной институциональной поддержки ресурсы адаптивности развиваются не последовательно, а одновременно.

Ключевые слова: карьерная готовность, добровольные стажировки, work-integrated learning, теория конструирования карьеры, Казахстан, качественное исследование, студенты бакалавриата

Аннотация

Бұл зерттеу Қазақстандағы бакалавриат студенттерінің ерікті тағылымдамалардан өткеннен кейін өздерінің кәсіби дайындығын қалай бағалайтынын зерделейді.

Тәжірибемен кіріктірілген оқытуға деген қызығушылық артып келе жатқанына қарамастан, ерікті тағылымдамалар — студенттер міндетті оқу талаптарынан тыс, өз бастамасымен өтетін тағылымдамалар — әсіресе посткеңестік білім беру жүйесі аясында әлі де жеткілікті зерттелмеген. Зерттеуге Қазақстандағы университеттерден ақпараттық технология және бизнес бағыттарындағы сегіз соңғы курс студенттері қатысты. Деректер жартылай құрылымданған сұхбаттар арқылы жиналды, Браун мен Кларктың (2006) тәсілі бойынша тақырыптық талдау жүргізілді, ал нәтижелер Савикастың (2005) мансап құрастыр теориясы негізінде түсіндірілді. Зерттеу нәтижелері студенттердің мансапқа дайындықты тағылымдама соңында толық қалыптасқан нәрсе ретінде қабылдамағанын көрсетті: олар бұл процесті біртіндеп дамитын нәрсе ретінде сипаттады, атап айтқанда жұмыс орнындағы жағдайларда өзіне сенімділіктің артуы, академиялық білім мен практикалық талаптар арасындағы алшақтықпен бетпе-бет келу, мансаптық бағыттың айқындала түсуі және белгісіздік жағдайында әрекет ете білу. Тағылымдама жағдайлары — атап айтқанда тәлімгерліктің қолжетімділігі, кері байланыс сипаты, эмоционалдық ахуал және төлемнің болуы — студенттердің осы тәжірибені қалай қабылдайтынына айтарлықтай ықпал етті. Айта кететін жайт, теріс нәтиже, мысалы белгілі бір саламен сәйкессіздікті сезіну, мансапқа дайындықтың қалыптасуына дұрыс таңдауды растаудан кем емес үлес қосты. Зерттеу Қазақстан университеттерінде міндетті өндірістік тәжірибе ресми түрде қарастырылғанымен, ол студенттер іздейтін кәсіби тереңдікті әрдайым қамтамасыз ете бермейтінін және осының салдарынан көптеген студенттердің ерікті тағылымдамаларды кәсіби дайындықтың мағыналырақ жолы ретінде таңдайтынын

көрсетеді. Алынған нәтижелер институционалдық қолдау шектеулі болған жағдайда бейімделу ресурстарының кезең-кезеңімен емес, бір мезгілде дамитынын көрсете отырып, мансап құрылымдау теориясының контекстуалдық кеңеюін ұсынады.

Түйін сөздер: мансапқа дайындық, ерікті тағылымдамалар, work-integrated learning, мансапты құрастыру теориясы, Қазақстан, сапалық зерттеу, бакалавриат студенттері

Table of Contents

Author Agreement	ii
Declaration.....	iii
Ethical Approval	iv
CITI Training Certificate	v
Acknowledgments.....	vi
Abstract.....	vii
Аңдатпа	ix
Аннотация.....	xi
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Background information	1
Problem Statement	3
Purpose of the Study	4
Research Questions	4
Significance of the Study	4
Outline of the Thesis	5
Summary	6
Chapter 2: Literature Review	7
2.1 Conceptualising Career Readiness.....	7
2.2 Internships and Work-Integrated Learning in Higher Education	8
2.2.1 <i>International Perspectives on Internship Pedagogy</i>	11
2.2.2 <i>Voluntary and Mandatory Internships</i>	12
2.3 Identity, Confidence, and Learning in Voluntary Internships	14
2.3.1 <i>Identity Formation in Voluntary Internships</i>	14
2.3.2 <i>Confidence and Self-Efficacy Development</i>	15
2.3.3 <i>Learning Beyond the Classroom</i>	16
2.3.4 <i>Implications for Career Readiness</i>	17
2.4 Student Perspectives on Voluntary Internship Experiences	18
2.4.1 <i>Student-Initiated and Self-Navigated Experiences</i>	19
2.4.2 <i>Value from Students' Standpoint</i>	20
2.4.3 <i>Ambivalence and Contradiction</i>	22
2.4.4 <i>Identity and Narrative Construction</i>	24
2.5 Voluntary Internships and Career Readiness in Kazakhstan	25
2.5.1 <i>Higher Education in Kazakhstan</i>	25
2.5.2 <i>Internships in Kazakhstan</i>	26

2.5.3 Research Gap.....	28
2.6 Theoretical Framework: Career Construction Theory	28
2.6.1 Internships and Career Readiness	29
2.6.2 Fostering Career Adaptability.....	29
2.6.3 Developing Vocational Identity	30
2.6.4 Experiential Learning and Meaning-Making	30
Summary	31
Chapter 3: Methodology	32
3.1 Research Design.....	32
3.2 Research Setting.....	33
3.3 Participant Selection	33
3.4 Sample Size and Composition	34
3.5 Data Collection tools.....	34
3.6 Data Analysis Procedures	35
3.6.1 Familiarisation With the Data	36
3.6.2 Generating Initial Codes.....	36
3.6.3 Searching for Themes	37
3.6.4 Reviewing Themes.....	37
3.7 Ethical Considerations	38
Summary	39
Chapter 4: Findings.....	40
4.1 Overview of Findings	40
4.2 Background Information about Participants	40
4.2.1 Readiness as Reduced Fear and Increased Confidence	41
4.2.2 Readiness as Confronting the Theory–Practice Gap.....	43
4.2.3 Readiness as Career Direction Clarification and Reorientation	45
4.2.4 Readiness as Navigating Uncertainty.....	46
4.3 Internship Conditions That Shape Readiness Development.....	48
4.3.1 Structured Supervision and Mentoring.....	48
4.3.2 Authentic Task Engagement, Feedback, and Progressive Responsibility	50
4.3.3 Emotional Climate	52
4.3.4 Compensation	54
4.4 Impact of Voluntary Internships on Confidence, Skills, and Identity	56
4.4.1 Developing Confidence Through Doing and Managing Work.....	56
4.4.2 Reconsidering Self and Career Direction.....	58

Summary	59
Chapter 5: Discussion	60
5.1 Interpretation of Findings in Relation to Literature and Theory.....	60
5.2 Developing Confidence Through Real Work Participation.....	62
5.3 Learning to act under unclear expectations	64
5.4 Professional Identity and Career Direction.....	66
5.5 Structural Conditions Shaping Career Readiness	68
5.6 Career Readiness through Voluntary Internships in Kazakhstan	69
Summary	71
Chapter 6: Conclusion.....	72
6.1 Summary of the Major Findings	72
6.2 Contribution of the Study.....	75
6.3 Implications for Practice and Policy	76
6.4 Limitations of the Study.....	78
6.5 Directions for Future Research	79
6.6 Personal Reflection	80
References.....	82
Appendix A: AI Declaration Form	93
Appendix B: Informed Consent	94
Appendix C: Recruitment Letter.....	96
Appendix D: Gatekeeper Letter	97
Appendix E: Interview Protocol	99
Appendix F: Data Analysis – Transcript and Coding Samples	100

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background information

Universities are now being held accountable like never before for student success after graduation as it relates to immediate employment in the labor force. The once simple task of transferring theoretical knowledge has shifted to developing students to be considered "career ready." This term has been approached from a holistic standpoint rather than a student's ability to obtain a job after graduation. Career readiness includes technical knowledge, but also the integration of transferable skills and students' overall professional self-efficacy (Peersia et al., 2024). On the other hand, "employability" can look at students' success after university through a variety of external factors such as ability of the labor market to absorb students and growth in the economy. Employability does not take into consideration the students' ability to reflect on their career decisions and enter into the workplace with a strong sense of who they are and what they want to do in their career (Wong & Hoskins, 2022).

One mechanism higher education systems have relied upon heavily to facilitate this shift is experiential learning, with internships occupying the frontier between college and career. These experiences have traditionally been situated within human capital theory, and it was assumed that any time spent working was essentially affording employers a "signaling" mechanism (Silva et al., 2018). Yet with the increasing diversity in the types of internships that students undertake, research has recognized that the quality of internship experiences can be widely varied. Structures such as work design, mentors and supervision are some of the structural factors that determine whether an internship turn out to be valuable or a mere task to be completed (McHugh, 2017).

One increasingly visible form of experiential learning sits outside institutional structures entirely: the voluntary internship, pursued by students on their own initiative,

usually during semester breaks, without academic credit or university oversight (Jackson & Wilton, 2017).

Despite the high incidence of these roles, there is an academic debate as to whether these experiences in the workforce can be translated into “the million-dollar question” of better employment outcomes (Silva et al., 2018). International studies suggest there is scope to develop adaptability and professional identity, however the benefits seem to depend more on how the student perceives the experience whether they see the exposure as an opportunity or as a threat to their autonomy (O’Connor & Bodicoat, 2016).

Contributing to the debate are persistent issues surrounding the relationship between higher education and the labor market in Kazakhstan, where the expectations of employers are known to surpass even those defined by university curricula and the National Classifier, mirroring wider transformation of occupational structures and creation of complex tasks and integrated occupations for which there are as yet no formal education pathways (Azhenov et al., 2023). Meanwhile many students are struggling to make these transitions as early career entrants, especially when it comes to career self-direction, communication with employers, and conception of expectations on the job (Azhenov et al., 2023).

Although professional practice (производственная практика) is formally required within many programs, these placements do not always provide meaningful engagement with employers, and students may experience them as procedural requirements rather than developmental opportunities (Azhenov et al., 2023). Within this context, voluntary internships have become an increasingly visible pathway through which students seek to strengthen their preparedness for professional life and gain experience beyond formal curricular structures.

Problem Statement

The degree of professional usefulness a work placement has within higher education remains a “million-dollar question” (Silva et al., 2018). It appears, however, that these opportunities to develop are often compromised by the lack of quality in work design or supervision (McHugh, 2017). Such inconsistencies are also seen in the way students perceive their placement experiences. Some describe the placement as a valuable development tool (‘Engagers’) and others believe that they are a form of cheap labor or irrelevant to their long term career goals (‘Disengagers’), typically when they are unpaid (O’Connor & Bodicoat, 2016). Yet, while such negative and positive responses to placement experiences are noted, the way in which this impacts on students’ career expectations is not well understood.

However, while variations in the experience and perception of these internships exist, there remains a wide knowledge gap in the impact that these unsanctioned, informal experiences will have on students’ conception of career readiness and how this relationship may differ in the context of Kazakhstan. Existing scholarship suggests a disparity between education and employer expectations and finds that graduates are not equipped with the self-direction and skills needed to navigate the labor market (Azhenov et al., 2023, 2024). Similar to this research, my work aims to identify both structural challenges for students’ career readiness development and explore the students’ experiences with the phenomenon of providing voluntary internships and its relation to their career readiness development.

Most of these models are still focusing on measurable results (i.e., job placement or employment rate), while not looking at how the students themselves define or come to construct their own sense of preparedness (Peersia et al., 2024). Indeed, international literature has also shown a lack of research on how students define their own experience of the workplace (Hora et al., 2020). Without looking at the student perspective, it is

impossible to make sense of how informal voluntary work environments can construct meaning around competence, identity and confidence. Consequently, we still lack knowledge of how these self-directed workplace experiences prepare students for the real world.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how undergraduate students in Kazakhstan perceive their career readiness after completing one or more voluntary internships. Specifically, the study seeks to identify which aspects of the internship experience—such as task relevance, supervision quality, opportunities for reflection, or feedback—students associate with growth in skills, confidence, or professional identity. Rather than applying externally defined measures, the study emphasizes student interpretation and reflection. To analyze these perspectives, the study will be informed by both international models of career readiness and Kazakhstani higher education policies, which together provide a multidimensional lens for interpreting how students perceive and construct their career readiness.

Research Questions

1. How do undergraduate students in Kazakhstan's universities perceive their career readiness after completing a voluntary internship?
2. What elements of the voluntary internship experience—such as supervision, relevance, reflection, or feedback—support or hinder the development of career readiness?
3. How do students describe the impact of voluntary internships on their confidence, transferable skills, and professional identity?

Significance of the Study

This paper builds on the literature covering student-centered career preparation. Focus is specifically on regions outside the usual global spotlight, like Kazakhstan. Most

existing research examines mandatory internships built into traditional degree programs (Blackwell et al., 2001; Silva et al., 2018). However, self-initiated pathways have received comparatively little scholarly attention. Bittmann and Zorn (2020) point out that while mandatory placements are standard, "voluntary internships have received much less attention in the literature" (p. 76). That leaves a blind spot. Optional work experience has clear benefits that remain mostly unexplored. Focusing on voluntary internships draws attention to a form of student agency that gets systematically overlooked when research concentrates only on structured, credit-bearing placements. Intrinsic motivation — the decision to seek experience beyond what a degree requires — is precisely the variable this study centres.

The relevance of this study operates on three levels. First, it provides universities with evidence on how students interpret their voluntary internship experiences, which can inform career services and external partnerships. Second, the findings speak to national education policy: the development of National Qualifications Frameworks (Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023) depends partly on understanding how student autonomy and self-directed experience contribute to graduate outcomes. Third, for researchers, the work adds nuance to how experiential learning is understood when it occurs outside institutionally structured programmes.

Integrating student voices into established theoretical models reframes the concept entirely. Instead of acting as waiting rooms before a real job, these placements function as active learning environments. Practice shapes how emerging professionals see themselves and their future work.

Outline of the Thesis

This thesis consists of six chapters. The first chapter has provided background of the research, statement of the problem, purpose statement, research questions and

significance of the research. The second chapter summarizes the most relevant literature on career readiness, workplace learning, voluntary internships and the higher education setting in Kazakhstan as well as presents a theoretical base of Career Construction Theory that is the foundation for this study. The third chapter describes methodology adopted for this qualitative study, its setting, research participants and respondent recruitment, data collection and analysis framework. The fourth chapter presents findings of data analysis structured around the three research questions and illuminating participants accounts and finds cross-cutting themes emerging from the analysis. The fifth chapter discusses the results of the study, referencing existing literature and Career Construction Theory. The sixth chapter is the concluding part of the study and suggests directions for further research.

Summary

This chapter has established the rationale for the present study. It has outlined the growing importance of career readiness in higher education, identified the gap in understanding how voluntary internships shape students' sense of preparedness — particularly in the under-researched context of Kazakhstan — and presented the research purpose and questions that guide the inquiry. The following chapter reviews the existing literature on career readiness, internships, and the Kazakhstani higher education context, and introduces the theoretical framework that informs the analysis.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualising Career Readiness

The concept of career readiness increasingly plays a defining role in higher education as pressure on institutions to show graduate outcomes increases. However, despite the frequency with which it is used the term remains conceptually varied and does not have a single, agreed upon definition, rather a number of perspectives which focus on various interpretations of being “ready”.

A second popular paradigm is one that defines career readiness as an application of competencies and quantifiable skills. For instance, NACE, adopting a competency-based approach, offers a definition of readiness that is comprised of such qualities as communication, teamwork, critical thinking/problem solving, professionalism, and adaptability (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2021). In this paradigm, career readiness is treated as an outcome to be developed, measured, and matched with the anticipated demands of potential employers. This paradigm has gained tremendous popularity in policy as well as institutional settings.

Nevertheless, there is an increasing body of thought that suggests these models only present a partial understanding of readiness. In particular, Clarke (2018) argues skill-based approaches neglect the wider contextual and relational dimensions that influence the graduate transition and considers that employability- and thus readiness- is not just the acquisition of skills, but the possession of capital (human, social and cultural), individual characteristics, and a labour market context.

As a response, an increasing number of researches turn to the internal and developmental aspects of readiness. Instead of defining readiness as a ‘state’, more recent researches conceive it as a non-finite, multidimensional, and experiential process, paves the way for using the construct of ‘development’ in research contexts (e.g., Peersia et al.,

2024). Peersia et al. (2024) operationalise work readiness as a multidimensional construct encompassing both cognitive and non-cognitive dimensions, one that develops through ongoing interaction with educational and professional environments rather than being fixed at any single point. The implication is that readiness cannot be externally imposed; it is something students build through accumulated experience.

Similarly, research suggests that pathways to readiness are not distributed equally among students. For example, Wong and Hoskins (2022) show that the ability of students to navigate this transition from higher education to employment is heavily influenced by access to preparation opportunities and resources. This highlights that readiness is not only an individual attribute but also a function of structural factors including institutional support, social capital, and access to relevant experiences.

The views expressed here imply that career readiness encompasses not just having the skills, but also being able to cope with uncertainties and effectively participate in workplaces. In the contexts like Kazakhstan where compulsory education can often lag behind work experience, pursued internships can be one important domain where those skills can be nurtured.

2.2 Internships and Work-Integrated Learning in Higher Education

The pathway to work has become ever more fragile (Clarke, 2018). It is in this context that the number of higher education courses dedicating significant portions of their courses to Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) has increased as a response to massification and the “employability agenda” in higher education (Jackson, 2019). The most common, and yet most loosely defined, form of WIL is the internship (Silva et al., 2018). While it has traditionally been associated with work experience orientated to occupational preparation or a “try- before-you-buy” hiring scheme on the part of employers (McHugh,

2017), newer literature has called for a re-evaluation of the internship as a pedagogical device rather than as a work exposure service (Billett, 2011; Stirling et al., 2016).

One of the primary assumptions of the current WIL literature, is that being near the job does not inherently lead to learning. Billett (2011) argues that the learning value of work-integrated experiences depends entirely on how those experiences are designed and facilitated — being physically present in a workplace does not, by itself, produce meaningful learning. Hence the literature, makes a differentiation between work placement (the place) and work-integrated learning (the pedagogy).

Internship pedagogy is theoretically supported by particular aspects of ELT. Kolb (1984) describes a learner moving through a continuous cycle of action and reflection, where a Concrete Experience prompts Reflective Observation, which facilitates Abstract Conceptualization and Active Experimentation. This learning model is universal in theory, but recent writing reveals the application of ELT in current interns to be problematic. Stirling et al. (2016) observe that many internship programs focus on the “Concrete Experience” - the work - and leave out “Reflective Observation.” Without an opportunity and forum for reflection on the experience, the instructional loop has been broken and the internship becomes simply a labor exchange.

In parallel to the emphasis on cognition laid out by ELT, more social approaches, like Lave and Wenger (1991), also propose Legitimate Peripheral Participation, which contextualize learning socially. Here the intern is a novice attempting to access a “community of practice”, and the literature tends to support the idea that the pedagogic value of an internship is proportional to the degree of legitimacy of the student, and hence their involvement in core tasks. When interns are “peripheral participants” who have access to core as well as peripheral tasks, learning is situated and deep. When they are

made to do menial tasks, they are denied access to the community practice, preventing professional identity (Jackson, 2017).

In order to apply these schools of thought, productive internships employ certain pedagogical mechanisms. Literature presents a consensus that reflection is the connection that links academic theory and the reality of a job. Studies by Jackson (2015) and Coulson and Harvey (2013) empirically show that a narrowing of the crystallization of soft skills happens when reflection is scaffolded through device like assessment journals or post-internship seminars. Reflection converts implicit knowledge of the workplace into explicit skills.

In addition, the position of the site supervisor may be an additional factor. McHugh (2017) points out that the mentoring relationship is the strongest predictor of student satisfaction. Instead, both studies commonly focus on the ‘feedback void’; the workplace offers formative and uncertain feedback, as opposed to summative assessment in university. Students who cannot take the initiative in querying the feedback will have limited success in translating their internship into employability skill development (Clarke, 2018).

In general, as far as the literature on WIL is concerned, it is clear that internships are not just a means of learning working skills. What is learned is influenced by the design of the internship itself and how the experience is made meaningful in practice. This moves the emphasis away from participation itself to the contextual factors in which internship is an experience. From this view, research often makes a distinction between various types of internships taking account of the difference between voluntary and compulsory (curriculum-based) internship.

2.2.1 International Perspectives on Internship Pedagogy

The implementation of internships varies significantly across geopolitical contexts, influenced by labor market structures and higher education policies. Analysis of international literature reveals distinct pedagogical cultures within work-integrated learning (WIL).

In the US, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) provides substantial commentary, emphasizing a market-driven, usage-based approach that focuses on 'Career Readiness Competencies.' Recent U.S. literature also addresses legal and ethical concerns associated with unpaid internships (Hora et al., 2020).

European literature presents a bifurcated perspective. In the DACH states (Germany, Austria, and Switzerland), a 'Dual System' of highly regulated internships within integrated Vocational Education and Training (VET) ensures uniform pedagogy and institutionalized university-industry partnerships. In contrast, within the broader European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the Bologna Process has promoted the integration of internships as a mobility strategy. Silva et al. (2018) critique this automatic integration, highlighting tensions between university-sanctioned 'quality' and employers' immediate productivity requirements.

Australian scholarship has played a prominent role in advancing WIL research (e.g., Jackson, Billett, Bridgstock, Rowe). The Australian context reflects a shift from targeted, site-specific initiatives to comprehensive, credit-bearing WIL strategies, with assessment and curriculum integration as central themes (Jackson, 2019). However, Jackson (2019) notes that scaling mentored placements for all students across curricula remains a significant logistical challenge.

The literature from East Asia, particularly China and South Korea, identifies government mandates as the primary driver of internship implementation, often aimed at

reducing youth unemployment. Mok et al. (2021) describe a 'massification' of internships in China, where quantitative expansion sometimes takes precedence over pedagogical quality.

2.2.2 Voluntary and Mandatory Internships

Perhaps the most important distinction in the WIL literature, however, is between required (curriculum-integrated) and voluntary (extracurricular) internships. This distinction is more than administrative; once defined as curriculum-integrated or not, the framework of the pedagogical experience, the student's orientation to motivation, and the intended outcomes shift.

Mandatory placements are officially sanctioned components of degree programs and directly contribute to academic credit. These placements involve a “pedagogical triad” (Billett, 2011), in which the student is simultaneously supported by both the organization and the university. This tripartite structure is argued to create a “pedagogical safety net,” primarily due to the oversight and control exercised by the university through mechanisms such as learning agreements, mid-placement feedback, and reflective assessments.

However, the compulsory nature of these placements introduces the risk of “placement fatigue” or diminished motivation. According to self-determination theory (SDT), such placements may be perceived as externally regulated activities, which can undermine intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When placements are not aligned with students' career goals and serve primarily to fulfill graduation requirements, the experience may be seen as compliance rather than an opportunity for professional development.

On the other hand, voluntary internships reflect a market-focused form of experience, as the student has greater agency and freedom to choose and navigate the experience. These are student-initiated work experiences, usually during summer breaks,

and are not embedded in the credit system. As the literature points out, voluntary internships tend to attract students with high levels of intrinsic motivation, as students self-select to construct a desired career story or to “signal” ambition to future employers (Spence, 1973). As the environment is fully selected by the student, the match of home interests to the tasks of the work is often stronger.

However, such a degree of autonomy does not come without a pedagogical price. With the dissolution of the university in voluntary placements, the ‘Pedagogical Triad’ is reduced to a dyad of student and employer, thus depriving experiences of the ‘pedagogical decoupling’ (Hora et al., 2020) with the university and the scaffolding and support for true depth of learning. With no mandated reflective journal submissions or attendance at academic seminars, voluntary interns may be experiencing in the workplace, but not in a way that leads them to make sense of their experience.

This situation presents a paradox. While voluntary internships offer the greatest degree of student agency and potential for career development, they also present significant risks of exploitation and limited pedagogical growth. There remains a substantial gap in the literature regarding how students navigate and succeed in these largely unregulated environments. Although much is known about student learning in structured, reflective settings, little is understood about the self-regulation strategies students employ when engaging in voluntary internships independently.

Taken together, these distinctions highlight internships differ not only in structure but also in the conditions under which learning occurs. This raises important questions about how such experiences shape students’ development beyond formal institutional frameworks.

2.3 Identity, Confidence, and Learning in Voluntary Internships

This section examines how voluntary internships contribute to students' development beyond skill acquisition, focusing on identity formation, confidence, and learning processes. Drawing on existing literature, it highlights how such experiences shape students' understanding of themselves as emerging professionals and influence their sense of preparedness for the workplace.

2.3.1 Identity Formation in Voluntary Internships

Transitioning to the working world can be seen as a process of becoming a professional. Given that voluntary internship students make a choice to enroll (as they undertake something beyond compulsory subjects), the process of identity construction is more obvious. Savickas' (2005) Career Construction Theory is a particularly relevant framework for understanding this process. Savickas explains that actors build career stories, not out of particular characteristics from birth, but rather through "adaptive behaviors" through which they attach meaning to their existing work-life circumstances. In this case, a voluntary internship activity is a task-based form of narrative processing a space in which the student can rehearse a potential future self.

Focused around this transition are shifts from the student identity defined by grade-seeking and theoretical engagement, toward what Jackson (2016) calls a pre-professional identity, one shaped by accountability, active contribution, and the social expectations of a real workplace. The nature of work is different- for the student, passive and theoretical; in the workplace, active and practical. Trede et al. (2012) emphasize that professional identity formation results from a series of social interactions in which an individual internalizes and adopts the norms, values, and behaviors of a profession or community. Drawing on Lave and Wenger (1991), the intern enters a community of practice as a peripheral participant — present on the margins, observing professional norms, gradually gaining

access to more central tasks. What shifts is not merely skill but legitimacy: the intern's contribution starts to count in ways that a university assignment never does. Through this participation, professional identity is not declared but enacted (Trede et al., 2012).

The voluntary nature of these internships complicates identity development, as they are prosocial acts of self-authorship. Because the student is selecting these projects with purpose, they are choosing to shape a desired future self by selecting a particular industry or type of work. This is consistent with Baxter Magolda's (2001) definition of self-authorship, in which the learner has moved beyond seeking answers from external sources and begins to trust their own internal voice. Therefore, the gains and losses achieved in this voluntary internship would have much greater implications for the student's core identity and expedite the crystallization of their vocational identity.

2.3.2 Confidence and Self-Efficacy Development

A concept closely related to identity is professional self-confidence. According to Bandura (1997), "self-efficacy is that aspect of self that pertains to an individual's belief in his or her own capabilities to initiate and perform the courses of action required to manage prospective situations." The basis of self-efficacy appears to be "mastery experiences".

In the academic world, mastery is a grade; in the internship, mastery is embodied and consequential. When a voluntary intern accomplished a task that had an organizational impact, a client presentation, a coding fix, or a drafted report, the intern could see, in a very real way, that they knew their stuff. Billett (2011) notes that the workplace can provide "affordances" (learning opportunities) that the classroom cannot, such as the pressure of real-world stakes. Moving through the real-world stakes allows the intern's abstract confidence ("I know the theory") to become situated confidence ("I can do the job").

But confidence in the voluntary internship rarely follows a straight line.. The developmental benefit of voluntary internships is not the lack of anxiety but in being able to surmount it. When a student survives and thrives despite anxiety, incompetence, uncertainty, and the absence of a professor's safety blanket, she builds her “psychological capital” (Luthans et al., 2007), which is an important part of career preparedness.

2.3.3 Learning Beyond the Classroom

Although formal education is well-suited to codify explicit knowledge, it is the informal study of internships that provides the means of passage into the more difficult world of tacit or unspoken knowledge, the practical knowledge of what works that drives everyday life. Sternberg et al. (2000) describe tacit knowledge as action-oriented and learned through experience rather than instruction — the kind of situational judgment that helps a person navigate a meeting, read a manager’s tone, or decide when to ask versus when to figure something out independently

Learning in this context is less about direct instruction and more about gradual enculturation into professional norms. Eraut (2004) makes a distinction between formal learning and ‘non-formal learning’ that occurs through social intercourse. In a voluntary internship, the student learns how to chair a meeting, read a supervisor's silence, and navigate the office politics. These are not lessons but practices. Jackson (2017) maintains that ‘soft skills’ such as teamwork and communication are treated abstractly in university syllabi but quite specifically in practice. The student must learn that good communication in a law firm is very different from good communication in a creative agency. This awareness can only be acquired through immersion.

As voluntary placements may not be academically supervised, a learner’s need for self-directed reflection becomes an important contribution to learning. The bare “experience” of work must be “processed” into knowledge, the central tenet of Kolb’s

(1984) Experiential Learning Cycle. In voluntary learning, the student must identify and make their own links between their workplace and academic learning, a process of cognition that simultaneously enhances the student through their continuing development of knowledge and the assessment of theory and practice that this affords.

2.3.4 Implications for Career Readiness

The combination of identity, confidence, and tacit learning redefines what “career readiness” means. Traditionally, as operationalized, for example, through the NACE competencies, readiness has been defined as a list of skills or competencies. However, the literature on voluntary internships points to a more comprehensive definition.

Tomlinson (2017) provides the framework of Graduate Capital, and states that employability is not only human capital (skills) but also identity capital and psychological capital. A student is ‘ready’ not when they have memorized a textbook, but when they have embedded their field professional narrative in their mind and developed the self-efficacy to overcome its hardships. By enabling students not only to develop skills but also to gain narrative capital, Students can develop stories of having faced difficult situations and successfully overcome problems, which can be used as currency in job interviews. Readiness, then, is not a static object, but a constructivist state of being borne of a lived experience of work.

Drawing from the theoretical discussion already discussed, previous research identifies that experiential learning fosters the development of a cohesive graduate identity. Jackson (2016) illustrates that the acquisition of practical skills through undergraduate experience allows students to see themselves as credible agents within their chosen professional sphere. By showcasing subject mastery in applied settings, students attain professional legitimacy and respect, an achievement that is echoed by the data collected from voluntary internship participants.

2.4 Student Perspectives on Voluntary Internship Experiences

.Students rarely describe their voluntary internships in the abstract terms used in the literature. They talk about what they did, why they did it, whether it was worth it, and what it meant for how they see themselves professionally. This section takes those stories seriously on their own terms. While the previous section explored ways in which internships might influence identity, self-confidence, and learning, such elements are relegated to the backdrop here. The emphasis is placed on the stories students tell about: their motivations for undertaking them, their evaluation of their successes and failures, and how they normalise their experiences within their stories of emerging careers (Jackson, 2017; Tomlinson, 2017).

This chapter aims to understand the internship as an interpretive and narrative space rather than as a pedagogical intervention. It does so by examining how students played the role of agent as they sought, negotiated and interpreted voluntary work, while simultaneously doing so within the boundaries, obligations and expectations of social norms (Clarke, 2018; Hora et al., 2020). In our participants' narratives, interns highlight not only the opportunities and rewards of the internship but also its ambiguities: opportunities and empowerment, exploitation and inequality, value and disappointment (Crain, 2016; Perlin, 2011). Such ambivalences must be seriously considered since they seem central to the interpretation of internships both in life and in narrative.

As universities are promoting work-based learning more undergraduates are seeking work placements, and in the wider public debates, employability is promoted, yet on the ground there is weak institutional brokerage and patchy engagement by employers: many students have to re-negotiate work placements themselves through networks, with little support; place-based learning in these circumstances becomes a highly contingent

endeavors and is mediated by what resources students can access (Hora et al., 2020; Silva et al., 2018).

2.4.1 Student-Initiated and Self-Navigated Experiences

The student narratives of voluntary internships depict the activities as ones they are much more on their own to locate, plan, negotiate, and make meaning of than in embedded, mandatory practice modules. Students talk about scouring for opportunities, cold-calling organisations, negotiating their experience, and trying to make sense of and value the work. International examination of practice experiences also demonstrates that, outside highly-structured programmes, students are left responsible for locating and arranging their internships themselves (Hora et al., 2020; Jackson, 2017). This locate-and-manage feel is especially prevalent in the Kazakh context, which has few structures in place to facilitate placement altogether and uneven support across institutions.

The course of action most often described in these stories begins with students “shopping around” for opportunities, consulting with friends, relatives, and acquaintances, or perusing online listings. Career centres, wherever they are described at all, are more said to be portals of information or delivery points for career fairs than actual brokers of quality-assured, well-designed placements, following the “event” rather than “curated” model of other systems (Hora et al., 2020). Hence, internships in these settings are largely a matter of one’s social network and personal endeavours: those connected to the “right” people will find their way into premier firms and organisations, others will either make do with whatever they can find, or their “supermarket” field placement will be completely misaligned with their study (Tomlinson, 2017).

Students appreciate the darkened opportunities and responsibilities that their self-initiated process brings. For instance, they speak of the reward of “finding something on my own” and taking “pride in sorting employers out” but also of their disappointment at

“being turned down again and again”, the ambiguity of roles, and the labour of convincing organisations to take them on. When placements lack structure and clear supervision, students are more likely to view them as informal arrangements and to see them as a consequence of being outside institutional mechanisms.

This ambivalence of voluntary internships, where empowerment and precariousness coexist, and where the placement is both self-selected and poorly framed, is the context in which students later draw on notions of agency, obligation, and value. I will now look in a little more detail at how they speak of choice and the boundaries of the voluntary.

2.4.2 Value from Students' Standpoint

However, when students speak about voluntary internships, they do not tend to describe their experience as solely worth in terms of skills acquired. They speak of different kinds of value that internships can have for them. These are often combined in the same account and might be revisited at a later stage of the students' lives, whether they continue their studies or get a job.

Another issue is instrumental value. Many students underscore the value of contacts, references and awareness of the functioning of the recruitment process (e.g. supervisors who appear as referees in future, colleagues informing them about vacancies, development of an ability to provide concrete examples in job interviews, etc. (Hora et al., 2020; Silva et al., 2018). In cases where recruitment decisions in Kazakhstan are often based on personal recommendations, access to contacts was rated as important as the tasks performed. Consequently, a placement was considered successful if it resulted in part-time work, an opportunity to get a job elsewhere or an invitation to come back, regardless of the mundane daily routine.

Students also mention their perceived symbolic value. It is said that even a short or less demanding internship can be beneficial when it is outlined in the CV or mentioned in an interview. One has been employed to do a certain task, it is felt, and one has worked in the real world, beyond university. If work is considered to be much removed from academic study and its practical application, any job-related experience provides reassurance when applying for a position, and in many respects, having done an internship is evidence enough. Context research into the use of internships as signals in the labour market and found that they can acquire symbolic value, acting as a sign of motivation and employment readiness (Nunley et al., 2016; Spence, 1973).

Further to the instrumental and symbolic aspects, students also describe the interpretive value of their experiences. Through their internships, students develop a better sense of whether a particular field, job, or work environment is a good fit for them. Students may find that they fit into a fast-paced environment, or, on the other hand, they may find that a certain type of organisational culture is not a good match for them. Students often describe what kinds of activities they find rewarding, what kinds of conditions they find difficult in a working environment, and what professional values are important to them. Other studies of work-integrated learning echo the importance of students' use of their internships to develop a sense of what working environments are compatible with them and which are not (Jackson, 2017; Tomlinson, 2017). Importantly, both positive and negative experiences seem to play a role in this sense-making process. Difficult internships, for example, may help students decide against working in similar fields or roles in the future.

In addition, students' narratives reveal that the value of the internship may change over time, and that an experience that at first appeared irrelevant (such as mundane office tasks) can be appreciated in retrospect (perhaps because of contacts gained or career

clarification), whereas at an earlier stage, the internship, which initially appeared prestigious, has become less relevant. This indicates that the value of an internship is not realised at the point of completion but continues to evolve after the fact. This morphing of the perceived value of internships correlates with the conflicted feelings that predominate in students' accounts, which will be examined further below.

2.4.3 *Ambivalence and Contradiction*

Students rarely described their internship experience as uniformly positive or negative. In most accounts, useful and frustrating elements coexisted — sometimes within the same placement, sometimes even within the same working week. They discuss useful experiences at the same time as doubting various elements of the placement. They mention positive possibilities at the same time as talking about issues of inequity.

One such example of strain is on confidence or “mixed feelings” about how “just” their work was. Several students recount instances in which they were given direct responsibility, struggled with real issues, or interacted with professionals in ways that made them aware of their capabilities and part of the environment. At the same time, other students have memories of repetitive, unpaid work, having tasks that compared to regular employees, or expectations that they would be responsible for certain things without the financial or official support to do so. Online participants may have similar feelings about unpaid or under-regulated internships (Crain, 2016; McHugh, 2017; Perlin, 2011). Overall, online participants may discuss interning as an experience that was both positive and negative.

Another conflict exists between what is expected and what actually happens. Expectations of an internship include high-quality learning opportunities, good supervision, and interesting work projects. These may be promoted by the university through advertising materials or student stories. When the internship is perceived to fall

short of these expectations, such as a lack of supervision or admin-oriented work, students can feel let down. However, even when this appears to happen, many students still find a benefit, which may be work contacts, a reference, or an idea of where their interests lie. Usually, reflections like this offer some criticism of an internship experience and acknowledge a lack of benefit. Similar observations have been noted in other research on student internships (Jackson, 2017; Silva et al., 2018).

Students can also see internships as opportunities to support inequality. They are often seen as a way to gain entry into professional spaces and types of employment that might otherwise be inaccessible, such as prestigious jobs in “hot” sectors of the economy. Some students tell a story about how an internship gave them access to something that they had previously been relegated to the outside of: they felt like they had been “inside” an organization for the first time. However, they are also aware that access to these types of opportunities is unequally distributed. Students with personal or institutional connections have an easier time obtaining placements in popular organisations, and students face additional hardships and disadvantages in just gaining a role. Financial constraints can serve as barriers to participation, and not all students can take on unpaid or low-paid positions, especially in large cities where the cost of living is higher (Brooks & Youngson, 2016; Crain, 2016). In Kazakhstan, besides class differences, other disparities in the region, in particular, serve as barriers and affect some students’ access to internship opportunities (more about this in the next paragraph).

The main point is that these mixed student accounts overlap instead of existing as isolated storylines. Students routinely hold competing ideas at the exact same time. A participant might admit that a personal connection landed them a prestigious role, value the actual learning, and resent working for free, all while accepting the unpaid labor as a required tax for future employment. Recognizing this tension keeps the analysis from

sorting internships into flat "good" or "bad" categories. Instead, we see students actively reconcile these contradictions as they draft their developing career scripts. The next section breaks down how individuals fold these conflicting experiences into their occupational biographies.

2.4.4 Identity and Narrative Construction

Voluntary internships do more than just generate immediate outcomes or a list of completed tasks. They actively shift how students map out their future careers. Participants consistently describe these placements as major learning events. Rather than just logging hours, students use the environment to figure out their professional identity and test what a long-term working life actually entails (Jackson, 2017; Tomlinson, 2017).

Students often cite specific scenarios, such as receiving feedback, being held accountable, or tackling workplace difficulties, that helped them see more clearly what is entailed in working in their discipline. In doing so, they examine whether certain tasks, settings, or notions align with their interests, competencies, and values.

Internships also become the subject of material that students later present when they talk about themselves to others. All the skills and knowledge gained during placements are relayed when students add entries to their CVs, discuss their experiences in interviews, and informally chew the fat with employers or other family members. Learners are told how they can turn even the smallest rudiments into attributes such as responsibility, ability, or the willingness to adapt by seeking advice from career services staff or friends and family to describe the tasks they perform in the right light (Jackson, 2017). One of the keys to this success is that the same treatment applies to failure: a poorly managed or dull internship can become ingrained as a useful experience that fosters the growth of preferences or makes clear what should be avoided.

There is also an indication in the literature that career readiness may not develop in the same way for all students. Despite it being framed as such in the literature, policy texts and in most cases in course design as a ‘technically direct’ pathway towards employment, findings from Silva et al. (2018) and Clarke (2018) suggest that readiness levels cannot appear as the outcome of one internship, but rather are a product of evolving interpretation of task as experience accumulates (Clarke, 2018). Internships seem to foster increased confidence and familiarity with workplace expectations, but can also highlight what students still need to know or do, and even make them more conscious of ‘difficulties’. In this way, readiness is an achievement in reflection and a means of comparison with other students, with users on the labour market, and with the future.

2.5 Voluntary Internships and Career Readiness in Kazakhstan

This section situates the discussion of voluntary internships and career readiness within the context of Kazakhstan. It outlines key features of the higher education system and examines how internships are structured and experienced, highlighting existing challenges and gaps in research.

2.5.1 Higher Education in Kazakhstan

The Soviet contribution to the content of Kazakhstan’s higher education can be summarized as centralized and disjointed, with a focus on discipline-specific knowledge and career-oriented programs (Smolentseva et al., 2018, p.1–2, 9). The ‘national curriculum’ and ‘narrow specialization’ concepts underpin the system of higher education, which was designed to train specialists for centralized economy (Smolentseva et al., 2018; Smolentseva & Platonova, 2022). The curriculum was more theoretical than varied or integrated to industrial processes (Dairov et al., 2020).

Since its independence in 1991, Kazakhstan has reformed higher education in order to adapt to socio-economic changes and employability needs. Reforms were, among others related to the Bologna Process and introduced the competency-based approach aimed at increasing the practical relevance (Dairov et al., 2020; Konurbayeva et al., 2024). Despite these reforms, questions have been raised as to whether graduates are sufficiently prepared to apply their in-demand skills.

Meanwhile, the remnants of a rigid, exam-blind system persist as an obstacle to students' career development. Expectations are clear, assessment procedures are standardised, and instruction is generally delivered by teachers. University-to-job travel is thus frequently fraught with ambiguity, informal expectations and supervision. These circumstances can be difficult, as students have to learn how to do more than just apply their knowledge; they have to perform in undefined environments, search for and initiate actions, and contend with professional ambiguity.

2.5.2 Internships in Kazakhstan

In Kazakhstan, the State Compulsory Standard for Higher Education (ГОСО) states that undergraduate programs must include an obligatory practical internship (Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022). Nevertheless, the internships have been criticized concerning their quality or implementation, with a considerable number being inadequately supervised, unequally tailored to students' educational backgrounds or pointless in terms of development (Abdugalina, 2020). The State Concept for the Development of Higher Education and Science in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2023–2029 stresses the importance to guarantee the prioritization of learning outcomes that meet the constantly changing needs of the labour market, in particular through the increase of practice-based learning (Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023, s3.1.3).

Voluntary work placements are less regulated forms of work experience, but they are becoming increasingly important. In the Kazakhstani context, voluntary internships extend beyond formally regulated placements, as they are initiated by students themselves, who must independently search for employers and arrange the placement. At the same time, access to these opportunities may be influenced by informal networks and personal connections. As a result, voluntary internships require not only motivation to gain experience but also the ability to navigate social and institutional networks.

The system for organising internships in Kazakhstan is regulated by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan. According to Decree No. 635, higher education institutions are obliged to organise professional practice (производственная практика) within the frameworks of academic programmes and to set responsibilities for students, the hosting organisation, and the academic supervisor (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2016).

Although a formal regulatory system is in place, there is evidence that not all internships are carried out consistently. Sankibayeva (2019) suggests that many internship programmes lack clearly specified guidelines and are not sufficiently integrated with expectations at work. Consequently, students have disjointed experiences which fail to adequately prepare them for work. This highlights the need to view internships not just as mandated policy events, but as actual events defined by and shaped by local realities.

In Kazakhstan, the administration and quality of formal internships may vary widely across institutions and study programs. At the same time, higher education institutions have increased their efforts to strengthen the applied side of education through dual education systems and closer collaboration with industry (Ministry of Higher Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024, p. 82). This suggests that experiential learning is recognised as important for employability at the policy level.

Furthermore, research suggests that partnerships between higher education institutions and the labour market do not always provide deeply engaging professional experiences. In the Kazakhstani context, these partnerships often focus on preparing students for employment rather than involving them in meaningful professional practice (Jonbekova et al., 2025). In this context, voluntary internships may offer an alternative, as they can provide students with more active roles and opportunities for engagement.

2.5.3 Research Gap

Educational policy in Kazakhstan clearly prioritizes internships and general employability. The problem is that current literature usually gets stuck analyzing institutional structures, administrative regulations, or basic program design. The actual student experience gets left behind. We know very little about how individuals navigate voluntary placements. More importantly, the field lacks data on how learners understand their own role in building career readiness. This study addresses that gap directly. By centring the perspectives of students who have completed voluntary internships in Kazakhstan, it asks how they understand and narrate their own development — a question that existing research has not systematically pursued.

2.6 Theoretical Framework: Career Construction Theory

In this research, Career Construction Theory (CCT) serves as a theoretical framework to examine how undergraduate students in Kazakhstan interpret their career readiness in voluntary internships. Career Construction Theory was proposed by Savickas (2005). It conceptualizes career as a story constructed by persons based on personal experience, psychological resources, and social context. The nature of CCT makes it appropriate for qualitative research studies, as it focuses on the interpretation of career and the formation of talent narratives about career.

According to the Career Construction Theory, career readiness is said to be developed through the relationship of career identity and career adaptability (Savickas, 2005). Career identity is actually how an individual conceives his or her future work and career, while career adaptability refers to psychosocial aspects of an individual in being able to cope with different tasks, transitions, and uncertainty in one's life. Career adaptability consists of four dimensions: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence.

Internships encourage students to evaluate the type of activity they would like to pursue, to imagine situations, and improve their understanding of a future professional activity.

2.6.1 Internships and Career Readiness

Internships are generally seen as a component of employability preparation (de Hollander et al., 2018, p. 40) or experiential learning (Kattiyapornpong & Almeida, 2021); for undergraduate students, they are an opportunity to bridge their academic learning to work experience, gaining an understanding of how their knowledge is applied (Bishop et al., 2015, p. 2). They can also facilitate the development of skills and smooth transition from university to work (Pan et al., 2018, p. 30).

From a career construction theory perspective, internships offer students opportunities to participate in processes that construct career identity and career adaptability.

2.6.2 Fostering Career Adaptability

Research suggests that internships are positively related to the development of career adaptability (Pan et al., 2018, p. 30). Career adaptability supports individuals' ability to handle tasks, transitions, and changes in the career domain (Wang et al., 2025). As interns work, they face new challenges that require initiative, adaptability, and problem-solving. These experiential learning opportunities equip students with resources

that facilitate further career decision-making and transition (Saputro et al., 2023, p. 1008).

Higher adaptability is also positively related to more positive career outcomes and professional role satisfaction (Wang et al., 2025).

2.6.3 Developing Vocational Identity

Opportunities for experiential learning, such as internships, may foster a stronger understanding of students' vocational interests and orientations (Keijzer et al., 2020, p. 379). In the context of internships, students can test out their expectations for how work will actually be and alter their perceptions of the world of work (de Hollander et al., 2018, p. 40). Reflection on and adjustment of course are often viewed as key processes of learning during internships (Popov, 2024). A positive internship experience can build students' confidence in their area of interest and may lead to a more concrete career identity (Ying et al., 2023).

2.6.4 Experiential Learning and Meaning-Making

The internship experience could be perceived as a creative and integrative learning opportunity, allowing students to draw meaning from their experiences and relate them to subsequent career roles. Reflection allows students to relate new situations to past knowledge, and develop a greater understanding of their individual self-with-work (Peila-Shuster, 2016). As they reflect, students develop a more focused sense of professional identity (Bishop et al., 2015, p. 2).

All of these benefits of internships help guide students in discovering their career interests, build adaptability, and reflect on a future career pathway. These processes, in turn, support the development of career readiness as described by Career Construction Theory.

Kazakhstan's National Qualifications Framework defines graduate competencies as observable, externally measurable outcomes. CCT offers something that framework cannot: a way of understanding how students subjectively construct meaning from their experiences and build their own sense of professional readiness from the inside out. That is why CCT is the appropriate interpretive lens here — not because it replaces the competency framework, but because it captures what the framework cannot see.

In this research, Career Construction Theory serves as a framework for interpreting the empirical findings. The review of literature does not seek to establish a new career development theory but rather explores the discipline, in which career-related experiences, such as internships and career readiness, are discussed, as well as the emphasis students place on voluntary internship experiences. This serves to place the investigation within a conceptual context, and at the same time, CCT is used in a more direct sense, in the interpretation of students' stories.

Summary

Overall, the literature has shown that career readiness is not a defined skill but a flexible and context-dependent process that is developed from experience. Whereas earlier texts focus largely on competencies and tangible results, recent works tend to emphasize identity, flexibility, and one's ability to make meaning as factors in students' entry into the working world.

Learning through internship is a significant part of this process; however, its developmental potential is limited by how students experience and make sense of their internship and by how the internship is designed and organized. Of special interest here are voluntary internships, which provide a unique and relatively unused setting, where students have high levels of agency but limited institutional support. In such settings,

students may experience exploration, confidence-building, and identity development, along with uncertainty, confusion, and inequality.

In the particular context of Kazakhstan, the above processes are additionally influenced by the history of a very regimented education system and continued difficulties with translating classroom interests into the world of work, thus making voluntary internships seem like more than ideal conditions for exploring how students learn to manage ambiguous expectations and develop a sense of career readiness.

Expanding on what we've learned, the next chapter investigates how students perceive and interpret their voluntary internship experiences through the lens of Career Construction Theory.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter describes the research design of the study, which uses a qualitative approach to explore how undergraduate students in Kazakhstan understand their career readiness after voluntary internships. It explains why qualitative methodology was selected and how data were collected and analysed.

The chapter presents the research context, participant selection, and purposive sampling strategy. It also describes the use of semi-structured interviews and explains how thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns across participants' experiences. The chapter concludes with a discussion of ethical considerations and procedures used to ensure trustworthiness of the study.

3.1 Research Design

This study used a qualitative, exploratory research design, guided by an interpretivist orientation. The choice of approach reflects the central aim of the research: to understand how students make sense of their voluntary internship experiences, rather than to measure those experiences against pre-defined outcome variables (Atkins & Wallace,

2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative approaches are well suited to research questions that ask how people interpret and narrate their own experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and this study's questions about student meaning-making after voluntary internships fit that framework

This study was also exploratory. Exploratory research is best for educational innovation when researchers are new to a phenomenon, a generally untested subject is being investigated, the research questions are broad and the goal is not to test hypotheses but to generate insight (Stebbins, 2011). This study explored how students make sense of their voluntary internship experiences and what those experiences mean for their sense of career readiness.

The study followed an interpretivist orientation. In qualitative research, interpretivist approaches focus on how individuals construct meaning through their experiences (Flick, 2022). This perspective fits the aim of understanding how students interpret their internship experiences rather than measuring objective outcomes.

3.2 Research Setting

The participants of this study were undergraduate students studying at Kazakhstan's universities. The participants are 4th year students and had at least 1 voluntary internship during their studying at the universities.

The participants represented business-related courses (e.g. finance, logistics), as well as courses related to IT. These were chosen due to the fact that internships are quite popular in these fields and are generally perceived as a sign of progress toward reaching one's occupational aspirations.

3.3 Participant Selection

The participants were selected through purposive sampling, whereby the researcher selected participants with a "relevant experience related to the research question" (Johnson

& Christensen, 2014, p.385). The study was suitable for purposive sampling where students who had been through voluntary internships were interviewed on their experience and how it related to the concept of career readiness.

Participants were recruited from university groups. Initially, gatekeeper letters were sent to relevant university departments. Once permission was obtained, the study invitation was circulated using internal mail services and student social media groups, whatsapp and telegram. Students that expressed interested contacted the researcher directly and screening was completed before interviews.

3.4 Sample Size and Composition

The study initially aimed to recruit between 10 and 12 participants, which would have allowed for broader variation across disciplines and internship types. In practice, eight participants were recruited before the data reached a point of sufficient richness for the purposes of this study. Several prospective participants who responded to recruitment messages did not meet the inclusion criteria (having completed at least one voluntary internship), and scheduling constraints prevented some interested students from proceeding to interview. Eight participants is consistent with the sample sizes reported in comparable qualitative studies of student workplace learning (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Johnson & Christensen, 2014), and the depth of data obtained proved sufficient to address all three research questions.

3.5 Data Collection tools

Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allow participants to describe their experiences in their own words and to introduce topics the researcher may not have anticipated, while the interview guide keeps the conversation anchored to the

research questions (Atkins & Wallace, 2015). For a study exploring how students narrate and make sense of internship experiences, this flexibility was essential.

To guide the participants to give answers to the main research question and sub-questions, probes were prepared a head of time. It also helped to clarify the answers of the participants when needed.

Interview questions moved from general background (the participant's course, internship context, and duration) to more reflective questions about specific experiences, supervision, challenges, and career impact. This progression allowed participants to establish comfort with the topic before moving into more nuanced reflection.

The information sheets, interview protocol and interview questions were written in Kazakh, Russian and English. Participants chose the language on the most convenient for them. All interviews were conducted online, lasted 40–60 min and were video-tape-recorded with participants' consent. On a number of occasions participants also provided a written follow-up. The aforementioned materials were used as a dataset for this study.

Semi-structured interviews were used as they granted the researcher the liberty to be flexible with the interview schedule, whilst maintaining focus on the issues relevant to the current investigation.

Information was collected through virtual interviews using video conferencing systems over the period of December 2025 to January 2026.

3.6 Data Analysis Procedures

Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, was used to analyse the data. The approach suited this study's aim: rather than fitting participants' accounts into a pre-existing coding scheme, thematic analysis allows themes to emerge inductively from the data, which is important when exploring an experience — voluntary internships in Kazakhstan — that has not been studied in this context before.

The data analysis was conducted according to the six-stage model proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): data familiarisation, initial codes generation, searching for themes, review of themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. These stages are outlined below.

3.6.1 Familiarisation With the Data

Analysis began with getting to know the data. All interviews were taped and transcribed word for word. Following data collection, I read each transcript multiple times and re-listened to a selection of recordings to gain a holistic sense of the data before beginning formal analysis.

For this step, I analyzed how the participants voiced their experience, feelings, challenges, and thoughts about career readiness in relation to their internship. Rereading allowed me to recognize themes about participants' confidence, nature of work and workplace learning, supervision, and work directions. This step familiarized me with the data for the coding process.

3.6.2 Generating Initial Codes

After familiarisation, I conducted line-by-line coding of the transcripts. Coding involved identifying meaningful segments of text and assigning short labels that captured the main idea of each segment (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Codes were developed inductively from the data rather than from predefined theoretical categories. I coded segments related to:

- students' perceptions of career readiness after internships
- emotional responses such as fear, uncertainty, and confidence
- descriptions of internship tasks and responsibilities
- workplace learning experiences
- supervision, feedback, and workplace environment

- reflections on skills development and professional identity

So, descriptions of feeling less fear about work were coded as reduced fear (Anxiety); descriptions of gaining clarity about career direction were coded as career clarification; discussion on supervision as mentoring; and descriptions of workplace atmosphere as supportive environment.

Coding was iterative. As new codes arose, I revisited previous transcripts to check that naming was appropriate throughout the entire dataset. This enabled me to generate an initial set of codes that highlighted the similarities and differences across participants.

3.6.3 Searching for Themes

The codes were then examined collectively to obtain general themes across participants. Similar codes were linked together as pre-categories.

For example, codes including reduced fear, confidence, and uncertainty were originally clustered under developing sense of readiness but were later subdivided into confidence and sense of increasing readiness to better represent differences in participants' experiences. Codes including mentoring, feedback, and internship structure were clustered under internship conditions. Codes concerning confidence, identity, and learning from experience were initially grouped as, but were later subdivided into, development of confidence and clarification of career direction.

The initial codes were categorised according to the different research questions.

3.6.4 Reviewing Themes

The emerging themes were then compared and refined to ensure that they were reflective of the data; reviewing the coded data extracts and assessing whether the themes were representative of the coded data, internally consistent, and distinctive from other themes of the coding. The themes were then defined and refined.

Certain categories were reclassified. For example, code reducing anxiety, increased confidence, and lack of certainty was subdivided into distinct subthemes according to the participant accounts. Also codes supervisor, feedback and workplace environment were regrouped accordingly.

This iterative process led to three distinct content categories that describe how students 1) develop a sense of readiness; 2) experience internship conditions; and 3) interpret internship value.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Following ethical clearance from the Nazarbayev University Institutional Research Ethics Committee (NU IREC) I started recruiting participants for this study. I sent gatekeeper letters to relevant university departments and, once permission was granted, I disseminated the recruitment via various student networks and social media (What'sApp, Telegram) and students who were interested called me.

Participants were given an information sheet and a consent form before each interview, which informed participants of the purpose of the study, what participation entailed, and how the data would be used. Participants were informed that their participation was free will, and that they could choose not to answer any question during the interview or, at any point, may refuse to continue. Russian, English, or Kazakh was used during interviews based on participants' preference.

I was mindful of the comfort and well-being of the participants throughout my study (Atkins & Wallace, 2015). Participants were aware that they could refuse to answer questions or terminate the interview if they felt distressed.

Confidentiality and proper management of data were preserved during the study procedure according to Nazarbayev University ethical guidelines. The transcripts did not

contain any names or other personal identifiers. All participants were given pseudonyms (P1 to P8) and the names of the participants were not used in the research report.

All recordings and transcripts from the interview schedule were stored on my personal laptop in passwords protected files which could only be accessed by myself. If other people needed to have access to such data then consent of the participants would have been sought and permission granted (see ‘consent’).

All recordings and transcripts are stored in password-protected files on the researcher’s personal device and will be retained for three years following thesis submission, in accordance with Nazarbayev University’s data management regulations

Summary

This chapter described the qualitative, exploratory design used to investigate how undergraduate students in Kazakhstan understand their career readiness following voluntary internships. An interpretivist orientation guided all methodological choices. Eight final-year students from IT and business disciplines were recruited through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted online between December 2025 and January 2026, and analysed using the six-phase thematic analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Ethical clearance, informed consent, and data confidentiality procedures are documented above and in the appendices.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Overview of Findings

This chapter presents findings from eight semi-structured interviews with Business and IT students who had completed at least one voluntary internship. Although participants differed in terms of sector, internship duration, structure, and payment, common patterns emerged across both groups.

The analysis is organised around the three research questions. The first section explores how students described their sense of career readiness after the internship. The second examines which aspects of the internship experience supported or hindered this development. The third considers how participants described changes in their confidence, skills, and professional identity.

4.2 Background Information about Participants

Table 1

Pseudonym	Field	Major/Programme	Internship setting/sector	Duration	Paid/Unpaid
P1	IT	Information Systems	Start-up (private sector)	2 months	Unpaid
P2	Business	Management	Public sector	1 month	Paid
P3	Business	Restaurant Business & Hospitality	Private sector	2 weeks	Unpaid
P4	Business	Finance	Public sector (government agency)	1 month	Unpaid
P5	IT	Information Systems	Public sector	1 month	Unpaid
P6	IT	Computer Science	Technology sector	1 month	Unpaid
P7	IT	Computer Science	Technology sector	2 months	Unpaid
P8	Business	Logistics	Private sector	3 months	Paid

Table 1 summarises participant characteristics (P1–P8). The sample included eight fourth-year undergraduates, evenly split between Business (n=4) and IT (n=4).

Internships spanned public and private settings and lasted two weeks to three months (typically one to two months). Most placements were unpaid (n=6).

Participants did not describe career readiness as something fully achieved by the end of the internship. Rather, they spoke about a gradual shift — becoming less hesitant in workplace situations, recognising the gap between university learning and real tasks, gaining a clearer sense of career direction, and learning to act when expectations were unclear. Four subthemes emerged from the data: reduced fear and increased confidence, confronting the theory–practice gap, career direction clarification, and navigating uncertainty.

4.2.1 Readiness as Reduced Fear and Increased Confidence

Most participants described feeling uncertain at the start of the internship. This was not always linked to a lack of knowledge — more often it came from not yet understanding what was expected of them or what the consequences of a mistake might be.

During all of the interviews, most students felt comfortable starting the internship. The experience was identified as unclear and sometimes tense, leading many students to operate through silence instead of action: they were not comfortable asking questions and observing until they felt ready to actively participate.

At the same time, a pattern began to differentiate across fields. IT participants often described hesitation in relation to responsibility and fear of making mistakes, particularly when tasks had real consequences. Business participants more frequently referred to hesitation in communication, for example uncertainty about how to approach supervisors or ask questions. These patterns were not absolute, as some participants described both types of uncertainty.

For example, P6 (IT) described the early stage of the internship as follows:

“At the beginning... I don’t know, I was just kind of sitting and watching more. I didn’t really want to take anything serious because I was thinking, what if I break something. It’s not like uni tasks, here it actually matters. So yeah, I was just trying to understand first before doing anything.”

A similar hesitation appeared in Business contexts, but was more closely related to communication. P2 (Business) explained:

“Honestly I was overthinking a lot in the beginning. Even small questions. Like I would sit and think, okay should I ask this or not... maybe it’s stupid, maybe they expect me to know already. So, I just didn’t ask sometimes and tried to do it myself, which... didn’t really help.”

Some students also admitted that, in some situations, the reluctance was not due to the situation. They reflected that, after all, sometimes the supervisors were encouraging and supportive but they still felt lost in terms of how much initiative should they take. So, the beginning uncertainty was in part internal to the students, responsible for the transition from university to working life.

Despite differences between the projects, most participants described a slow transition in behaviour. As you learn more about the tasks, expected behaviours, and other team members you are able to take more charge, and speak with greater freedom. This was not described as a rapid changing of competence, but an increasing confidence in acting once unsure.

As P5 (IT) reflected:

“Then later it’s just... normal. If you don’t get something, you ask. At first I thought you need to show that you know everything, but actually no one expects that. So after some time you just stop stressing about it that much.”

But this hesitation was not present on all students. A couple of students still experienced hesitation toward the latter part of the internship, especially when faced with new situations and responsibilities. For example, P3 (Business) said:

“Even later there were still situations where I was like... okay, I don’t really get what they want here. Especially if it’s something new. It’s not like you become confident in everything, it kind of depends, I think.”

None of the participants described a sudden or complete sense of readiness. Rather, they characterised it as a process of becoming progressively less hesitant and more willing to contribute over time.

4.2.2 Readiness as Confronting the Theory–Practice Gap

All students mentioned a gap between their knowledge acquired in university and the skills they had to apply during the internship. It was present in nearly all interviews but the students expressed it in different ways. The lack was usually perceived after the beginning, when they had to work by themselves and understood that knowing something means nothing without knowing how to do it.

A handful of respondents agreed that tasks in the university were more straightforward. They understood the requirements, the process of completion, and what ‘done’ looked like in advance. With the internship this was less clear. Tasks frequently triggered learning moments where they needed to decide on a course of action, clarify their task, or adapt their process to suit the circumstance. As a consequence students described experiences of stopping, faltering, and going back over the same activity until they understood what was underneath.

For example, P7 (IT) said:

“At uni it’s simple, you get a task and just do it. But at work it’s different... there is already a system, and you need to understand how everything is connected. I remember I

was stuck on something small for a long time because I didn't get how it fits into the whole thing."

P1 (IT) captured this exact friction between academic theory and practical application:

"We studied it, so I thought I know it. But when I came there, it didn't feel like I know it anymore. Like I understand the idea, but I don't know what exactly to do with it. So, I had to ask and kind of learn again, but differently."

Business students reported almost the identical shock, just in a different operational context. (They struggled with vague interpersonal instructions rather than technical systems). Academic environments usually provide a clear grading rubric. The workplace rarely does. P4 (Business) articulated this specific shift from structured certainty to daily ambiguity:

"In university everything is very clear. But at work sometimes they just give you something and you don't really understand what they want. You need to ask, check, think... it's not like there is one correct answer."

The challenge goes beyond just interpreting unclear tasks. P8 (Business) pointed out that university models usually strip away the messy variables of actual office life:

"We learn how it should be, like the correct way. But in reality, it's not always like that. There are people, deadlines, small details... and you have to deal with all of that at the same time."

Even though students talked about this difference, they did not reject their university learning. Some participants said that basic knowledge still helped them, especially at the beginning, but it needed to be adjusted to real situations rather than used directly.

For example, P5 (IT) said:

“The basics helped, like how to think, how things work in general. Without that I would be completely lost. But still, it’s not enough on its own.”

For the students, generally speaking, knowledge was being viewed in a different way through the internship. Rather than based on existing knowledge, knowledge challenged itself, shifted, changed and sometimes dragged the student back to a more local, hands-on, pragmatic starting point. Readiness in this context meant not precisely what one has but how one learns through it.

4.2.3 Readiness as Career Direction Clarification and Reorientation

These responses show that students did not always make clear decisions about their future after the internship. Instead, they described changes in how they think about their direction. In some cases, the internship confirmed their choice. In others, it made them question it.

For a number of people, the placement was a first opportunity to see what these areas really look like in reality. This allowed them to bring it down from the realm of ideas into reality.

P7 (IT) captured how the experience forces abstract ideas into concrete plans:

“Before I just thought like... okay, IT is fine, I’ll probably work somewhere in this area. But I didn’t really know what exactly. During the internship, when you see how the work is actually done, it becomes more real. I started thinking more clearly, like what kind of tasks I want, not just ‘IT’ in general.”

P5 (IT) framed this same shift through daily operational comfort rather than grand career planning:

“When you actually sit there and do the work, you understand faster if it’s yours or not. For me it was more like... okay, I can do this, and I don’t feel uncomfortable doing it every day. That mattered more than what I thought before.”

P8 (Business) experienced this exact negative realization:

“At first I thought I would enjoy this, because it sounds good on paper. But when I started working, I realised it’s not something I want long-term. It’s not even about difficulty, just... I didn’t like the process itself.”

P3 (Business) reported a similar, though slightly milder, recalibration:

“It didn’t make me completely change everything, but it made me think... maybe I don’t want exactly this. Before I didn’t really question it, but now I do.”

These realizations rarely ended in hard, permanent decisions. Students usually described a softening of their expectations instead of absolute certainty. They started paying attention to smaller environmental variables. Things like team dynamics and specific daily tasks suddenly mattered more than the general prestige of the field.

Across the interviews, readiness was rarely described as choosing a final career path. Students described moving from general ideas about their field toward a more grounded understanding of what the work actually involved day to day. That exposure confirmed the initial choices for some participants. For others, it generated necessary doubt and forced them to look at alternative options.

4.2.4 Readiness as Navigating Uncertainty

Another clear pattern emerged around dealing with unclear situations. Most participants brought this up in some form. The catch is that this confusion did not just happen during the first week. Uncertainty persisted long after students learned their basic routines. Workplace assignments rarely come with a perfectly written prompt. Instructions stay incomplete. Sometimes they change entirely because of someone else's timeline. Because of this, students found themselves forced to act without knowing if they were actually doing the job right.

P6 (IT) detailed this exact process of stressful trial and error:

“At the beginning I thought there would always be someone checking everything step by step, like telling you what’s right and what’s wrong. But it’s not really like that. You do something, then you look at the result, maybe you compare it with something else, or ask later if it’s okay. And sometimes you realise it’s not, so you go back and change it. In the beginning it was stressful, because I felt like I’m just guessing.”

P1 (IT) focused on the behavioral adaptation required to survive that kind of environment:

“Before, if I didn’t understand something, I would stop. I wouldn’t move forward. Later I started doing it step by step and checking along the way.”

Over in the business placements, ambiguity looked a bit different. (It was usually tied to conflicting human communication rather than technical systems). P2 (Business) hit on this exact frustration:

“You ask one person, they tell you one thing. Then someone else says something different. And you’re thinking... okay, so what do I follow now?”

P4 (Business) provided a great reflection on abandoning the academic mindset entirely:

“At first I was waiting for everything to be explained properly, like clearly, step by step. But then I realised no one really works like that there. People just expect you to start, and if something is wrong, you fix it later. So I had to change how I approach tasks. Not wait, but start doing and then clarify as you go (уточнять по ходу?).”

Not all participants reached a point of comfort with uncertainty. Ambiguity stayed highly stressful, especially when a mistake might actually cost the company something or impact coworkers.

But look at the main takeaway across the interviews. Career readiness is not about removing uncertainty from the job. It is about changing the reaction to it. Instead of

freezing until instructions become perfectly clear, students learn to execute based on partial understanding. They ask questions, test the results, and adjust the work as they move forward.

4.3 Internship Conditions That Shape Readiness Development

This section presents findings related to the second research question, focusing on how different aspects of the internship experience supported or hindered students' sense of career readiness. Five conditions emerged from participants' accounts as consistently significant: levels of supervision, types of feedback, task design, emotional climate, and whether the placement was paid

Specifically, interns repeatedly mentioned several conditions that appeared to be both pervasive during their internship and influential in determining how positive or negative their experience would be. These included levels of supervision, feedback types, working tasks, overall work environment, and paid versus unpaid status. While each participant did not experience all conditions in the same manner.

The following subsections will show each of these conditions in detail and how they felt they would impact upon student participation, learning and perceived preparedness.

4.3.1 Structured Supervision and Mentoring

Supervision — or more accurately, the availability of someone to consult — emerged as one of the clearest differentiating factors between internship experiences across the sample. By and large, every interviewee noted that there was some individual (in either an informal or formal manner) they could turn to for help with activities and how that presence affected their approach and comfort level.

Mentorship varied considerably across placements. Some participants had consistent support, while others were left largely on their own. The nature of this guidance

differed between IT and Business placements. In the IT groups, supervision meant learning problem-solving frameworks rather than getting direct answers.

P7 (IT) explained how this indirect help actually breaks the bottleneck:

“I remember there was this task, and I was just looking at it and didn’t really understand where to even start. It’s not like in uni where you have a clear instruction. Here it’s more like, okay, this needs to be done, and you figure it out. So I asked one guy from the team, and he didn’t solve it for me, but he showed like... where this part connects, why it’s written like that. And after that it kind of clicked. Before that I was just sitting and looking at the screen, honestly not doing much.”

P1 (IT) highlighted the unspoken rule that interns must struggle independently first:

“No one really explains everything from the beginning. You kind of understand that you’re supposed to try first. And I did make mistakes because of that. But then when I asked, they would explain why it didn’t work, not just fix it. So over time I started thinking more before asking, like checking a few things myself. It changes how you work.”

The business placements looked completely different. Supervision here focused on clarifying expectations and internal communication rules. P3 (Business) hit on this exact issue when working with spreadsheets. “I was doing these Excel tables, like checking numbers and comparing different versions. And the thing is, you can check everything, but that’s not really the point. You need to understand what exactly they want you to focus on. At the beginning I didn’t really get that, so I was just going through everything. Then someone explained like, ‘no, look here, this is what matters’, and after that it became much easier.”

P2 (Business) pointed out how basic guidance relieves the anxiety of unwritten office communication rules:

“Sometimes I had to write messages or ask for information, and I wasn’t sure how formal it should be, or how to phrase it so it sounds okay. And I would spend too much time just thinking about it. When someone checked it or just said ‘write it like this’, it kind of removed that stress, because you know you’re not doing something wrong.”

At the same time, a few participants described having limited access to guidance and needing to rely more on themselves.

P6 (IT) explained:

“There wasn’t really one person responsible for me. Everyone was doing their own work, so I felt like I shouldn’t interrupt too much. Sometimes I asked, but not always. So a lot of the time I was just trying to understand things on my own, looking at how others did it or just trying different options. It’s not that no one would help, but you kind of hesitate to ask every time.”

In each case, supervision was not a formal system of guidance. Instead it was simply being in a position where one could reasonably make a request to speak and receive a clear answer related to relevant work. Such circumstances allowed the students to proceed with increased confidence and efficiency, whereas lack of such supervision led them to depend on the less effective method of trial and error.

4.3.2 Authentic Task Engagement, Feedback, and Progressive Responsibility

Throughout this series of interviews students never left task, feedback and responsibility as different aspects of the experience. They described a kind of circle, an iterative process of doing, sending and struggling with what happened to the work afterwards. It was an issue in almost every interview, although not always in the same way.

In some instances, the participants had only realized an aspect of their work required improvement after viewing the piece again.

P5 (IT) described:

“I pushed it, and I thought okay, done. Then later I opened it again and... it wasn’t the same. Not like everything changed, just small things. And no one told me anything. So I was just sitting there like, okay... what exactly did I do wrong here. You kind of go line by line and try to guess.”

P7 (IT) described this process in detail, reflecting on a moment where work was silently corrected without explanation:

“There was this one task where I actually thought I did everything right. Like I checked it, it was working, no errors, everything looked fine. So I sent it and kind of moved on. And then later when I came back to it, I saw that it was changed. Not completely, but enough to notice. And I remember thinking, wait... why this part? Because for me it made sense the way I did it. I didn’t ask immediately, I just looked at both versions and tried to understand. And it took time, honestly. It’s not like you see it instantly. You kind of sit there, compare, think about it. And then only later you start understanding what they expect. But no one really explains it step by step.”

Over in the business placements, we see the exact same behavior applied to routine communication. Supervisors just overwrite the text. P4 (Business) noted this clearly:

“They edited what I wrote, but not like explaining anything. Just... changed. And you see it after. I didn’t really ask, I just compared.”

P2 (Business) echoed this, highlighting the intern's hesitation to ask questions:

“I didn’t want to ask every time, honestly. So I just looked at what they corrected and tried to remember it.”

We cannot assume this silent correction happens everywhere, though. Some students experienced a complete void. They received zero visible response. P6 (IT) captured the anxiety of that silence:

“Sometimes you send it and... nothing. No reply, no comments. And you’re just sitting there thinking, is it okay or did no one even check.”

While the specific form of correction differed — IT students found their code quietly altered, while Business students found their messages rewritten — the underlying experience was similar. Participants submitted work and received no explanation of what had changed or why.

These different narratives seem to imply that development of career readiness in voluntary internships is not so much a matter of direct instruction or facilitated mentoring from supervisors, but of the students’ learning how to read what is not said and adapt their work accordingly. Instead of an actual guidance process, students found themselves in a situation where their learning was driven by their perceptions of continuity and difference, by observations and comparisons, by silent expectation. The development of career readiness, therefore, appears to not only include technical and interpersonal skill application, but also the art of handling ambiguity.

4.3.3 Emotional Climate

The experiences of the participant was affected not only by their activity, but also by what the interaction was like from day-to-day. The students did not often describe this interaction as ‘climate’ or ‘environment’. Instead they use examples of small details: How people responded, using questions, how at ease you felt doing chatting and meetings.

Some participants spoke about being cautious in how they communicated while inquired or feeling unsure of what was expected of them as interns. It was not as if they were explicitly told how to behave in this aspect or anything like it, but rather it was a personal choice based on an interpretation of the work situation.

P6 (IT) described this hesitation:

“Everyone is busy, doing their own things, so you kind of try not to interrupt too much. Even if you don’t fully understand something, you sit with it for a bit first. I wouldn’t say anyone told me not to ask, it’s just how it feels.”

Uncertainty was here no longer linked to its technical challenge, but to reading what an appropriate situation is when it is appropriate to ask, and how often, and how independent is it to do so.

In Business internships, similar caution was seen in some communication tasks. For example, participants talked about “spending ages fiddling around” with a message or an email, even when the task was trivial.

P2 (Business) explained:

“Even small things take time, like writing a message. You read it again, change a few words, then again. Not because someone said anything, but you just don’t know what sounds normal there.”

This example illustrates how emotional reassurance was available and connected to co-orientation with informal expectations rather than requirements. The fields of uncertainty were spread across the task rather than within in.

Similarly, a number of participants reported situations in which interaction became increasingly easy after watching other people at work or listen.

P1 (IT) captured this dynamic perfectly:

“It’s actually more simple than I expected. People just do their work, and if you ask something, it’s fine. There’s no big reaction. So after some time you stop overthinking it.”

Notice what happens here. The intern stops hesitating simply because nobody gets angry. What P1 describes is not a dramatic change but a gradual accumulation of ordinary interactions — moments where asking a question caused no negative reaction, and where that itself was reassuring.

P3 (Business) gave us a great look at the timeline of this process. (The initial stage is almost always pure caution). They map out exactly how that early self-censorship works before the intern figures out the office culture:

“In the beginning I was trying to be careful with everything, how I speak, what I write, even small things. Not because someone was strict, actually people were quite normal. But you still feel like you need to behave properly, because you don’t know yet how communication usually happens there.”

Later it becomes more natural. You see how colleagues phrase things, how short or detailed messages are, and you start doing similar. No one explains it directly, you just pick it up.”

In all interviews, emotional climate was not described as formal aspects e.g. ‘supportiveness’, but rather as a felt sense of interaction. When responses were neutral and predictable, participants reported fewer obstacles to participation. Where expectations were not so transparent, uncertainty persisted for longer, even if no slack response or deadpan was given.

From an analytic aspect this indicates that readiness growth was affected not only by the task complexities but by the perceptions of how manageable the social interactions felt under normal work circumstances.

4.3.4 Compensation

Throughout the interviews, compensation was not something that emerged as its own topic without prompting from the interviewers. Compensation would informally surface when students would discuss their time, effort, and if the internship was “worth it” from a practical point of view.

Unpaid internships were often described as higher pressure to endure, particularly in conjunction with a heavy course load. While unpaid experience was accepted in the interviews, it was often seen as a necessary given, and something you had to compromise.

This tension is particularly visible in the following account:

One participant reflected:

“At some point I wanted to quit. Especially when you’re tired and you realise it’s unpaid. Sometimes you think, I could be using this time to earn something. It’s not about wanting money — it’s about feeling that your time has value.”

In this example, the perceived problem of the internship is not framed as frustration with the internship, but if so, how you could possibly work so hard unpaid. Similar wording was found in a number of other interviews; students outlined how they tried to persevere under pressure, but then wondered if it could work in the longterm.

At the same time, being paid — even a small amount — seemed to matter beyond the money itself. Several participants described paid placements as feeling more “real” or more serious, as if payment confirmed that their contribution had actual value rather than being a training favour.

A handful of responses indicated that being in a financial position of hardship added stress, especially if payment was inconsistent or perceived to be unclear. Here, the primary focus was on the role rather than on the learning.

One participant described this more directly when talking about delayed payment:

“There was a time I wasn’t paid for like two months, and at the same time there were conversations about maybe letting me go. So it was a bit stressful, because you don’t really understand what’s happening. I wasn’t even thinking about learning at that point, just... what is going on with this job.”

What emerges from all of the interviews is that compensation was not solely for financial recompense. It impacted on students' perceptions of their involvement, for how long they would stay there and how they would interpret the worth of their contribution. This was not to do with facilitating or preventing learning, but enabling the conditions under which it would occur.

4.4 Impact of Voluntary Internships on Confidence, Skills, and Identity

This section addresses the third research question: How do students describe the impact of voluntary internships on their confidence, transferable skills, and professional identity?

Throughout the interviews students did not talk about outcomes of the internship in terms of 'confidence', 'skills', 'identity' etc. Instead these seemed to run together in interviewees' accounts. Enthusiasm for practice was expressed in terms of confidence to perform, whereas career direction was expressed in terms of ability to do (or lack of ability to do).

On this basis, the analysis was developed to look for larger changes across how students constructed the relationship of the self with work. These are summarized below in two aligned patterns.

4.4.1 Developing Confidence Through Doing and Managing Work

If you look across the interviews, confidence never shows up as a sudden breakthrough. Students actually talk about it sideways. They point to routine moments where they suddenly realized they were working without constant supervision. Originally these responses were grouped just as "confidence" during the first coding pass. But looking closely at the transcripts from P1 through P8, the interns almost never use that exact word. They simply describe the point where they stopped second-guessing their own decisions in specific situations.

This trajectory is highly visible in the IT group (P1, P5, P6, P7). For them, self-assurance ties directly to tangible contribution. They measure their progress by the exact moment their work actually gets used by someone else. P7 breaks down how this transition from isolated practice to real contribution happens:

“At first it was mostly small things, like fixing something that was already there. And I didn’t really feel responsible for it, because it’s just a small part. But then they started giving slightly bigger tasks, and you understand that this will actually be used. And you start checking everything more carefully, because now it’s not just practice. And when it works well, you feel different. Not like confident in general, but you understand that you can handle it.”

A similar shift appears in P5’s account, but more briefly:

“When they gave me a normal task, like a team member, that changed everything.”

A similar shift was described in Business interviews (P2, P3, P4, P8), although participants more often referred to communication and coordination of tasks.. Participants referred to situations where they had to clarify tasks, respond to feedback, or organise work without creating confusion for others. For example, P2 noted:

“You learn how to ask in a way that people understand what you need.”

In both groups, the increase in confidence came with repeated experiences to take responsibility without the need for encouragement or input from others. However, this was not the same across all of the subjects. The majority of the participants (P1, P2, P3, P5, P7, P8) mentioned being more confident as time went on while P4 and P6 continued to mention being unsure in certain situations when outcome expectations were ambiguous or where the potential outcome was greater.

4.4.2 Reconsidering Self and Career Direction

A different, but related, pattern across interviews was how students began to rethink their place in the professional field. This was not always described directly as “identity,” but appeared in how participants spoke about belonging, suitability, and future plans. During the first round of coding, these responses were initially grouped under the “identity” and “career clarity” categories. (Such overlap appears frequently when measuring career readiness). Revisiting the transcripts shows they actually belong to the exact same process. Students rarely deal in broad abstract statements about their futures. They point to highly specific interactions. Their internal perception suddenly shifts. P5 gave a detailed breakdown of how this transition happens during a routine office meeting:

“There was a meeting where they were discussing something, and I actually understood what they were talking about without asking someone after. Before that I would just sit and try to follow, but not really get everything. And in that moment it was like... okay, I’m actually following this. And then later I also said something, just a small comment, but they reacted to it normally. Not like ‘you’re an intern’, just like part of discussion. And after that it feels different, because you’re not just sitting there anymore.”

Other participants described the transition without the long narrative. P6 showed exactly how the profession loses its intimidating aura:

“Before, ‘developer’ sounded like something distant. After working there, it feels more real.”

Business participants described a similar process, but through understanding how work is organised rather than through role titles. P3 explained:

“It’s not only about doing your job. It’s about how you communicate, how you clarify, how you avoid misunderstandings.”

At the same time, not all experiences confirmed students' expectations. For some (P4, P8), internships led to a clearer understanding of what did not suit them. As P8 described:

“After working there, I realised this environment is not for me... Now I know what kind of place I don't want.”

Throughout the interviews, the sense of identity in the internship did not seem to be a predefined result. Instead, it was built by comparison: on the one hand between the circumstances and expectations, and, on the other hand, between the ideal roles and routine practices. In this way, the internships seemed more like “rehearsals” of future roles than direct realizations.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings from eight interviews with IT and Business students who completed voluntary internships. The analysis showed that participants described career readiness as developing gradually through engagement with real work tasks, workplace expectations, and everyday interactions with colleagues. Across interviews, students referred to changes in how they approached uncertainty, responsibility, communication, and future career plans. While experiences differed across contexts, the findings indicate that voluntary internships provided an opportunity to better understand professional environments and reflect on possible career directions. The next chapter discusses these findings in relation to Career Construction Theory and existing research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Interpretation of Findings in Relation to Literature and Theory

In this chapter I reflect on the findings in relation to the research questions and to the literature related to career readiness, WIL and CCT. As part of the research, I examined how undergraduate students enrolled in one of the Kazakhstani Universities explain the impact of voluntary internship program on the development of their career readiness.

The results indicate that students did not believe that their readiness had been fully formed on the outset of employment. Rather, they indicated that their readiness emerged from considering how authentic work circumstances may alter their previously learned knowledge. Through the internship, students encountered the actual conditions of professional work — ambiguous tasks, implicit expectations, and feedback that rarely came in the form they had been trained to expect. Several participants described learning a great deal simply from watching how more experienced colleagues communicated, organised their time, and handled ambiguity — learning by proximity rather than by formal instructions. Students were thus able to construct an image of a “normal worker” in a given organisational context. It was not just a case of learning how to complete the work however. A majority of students considered that they had to “hold back” on their internship, observing that they “feared falling short” of their expected standard. In the IT internships, this was “usually” the fear of making a technical error, such as “breaking a system”, whereas in business fields the fear related more to “social errors” such as “asking a stupid question” or “not knowing who was senior to whom”. It highlights that self-confidence (Savickas, 2005) simply relies upon profession-specific fears; students must combat their particular professional fears before they may come to experience readiness. Prior WIL observations provide a similar insight from previous research; that hands-on

experience can allow students to better understand their roles and responsibilities within a profession (Bowen, 2011; Popov, 2025).

Participants reported that their readiness to enter the workforce was not only related to acquisition of skills, but also to numerous shifts in their perception of themselves and their future job roles. Several students explained that they felt more comfortable with accepting responsibility, more sure of their performance and of the kind of work environment they need to thrive. However, these perceptions tended to evolve over time. Participants clarified that their expectations about work became more realistic once they observed how assignments are organized, and how different responsibilities are divided within a work group. In congruence with past research, practical experience was found to facilitate career decision-making self-efficacy and help students set more realistic career expectations (Liu et al., 2023). Students in the present study also expressed this phenomenon: they adjusted their expectations about the workplace progressively once they became familiar with work practices (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018).

Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005) grounds the interpretation of these findings. The framework treats career development as a continuous process shaped directly by practical experience. CCT suggests that individuals build specific adaptability resources to handle occupational challenges. These resources include confidence, control, curiosity, and concern. In the actual data, these dimensions rarely develop in isolation. They overlap constantly. A participant might report a sudden spike in confidence while simultaneously developing a new curiosity about how the broader organization operates.

Voluntary internships clearly trigger development across all four of these areas. The execution of actual work tasks directly drives confidence. Control emerges slightly differently. Participants demonstrate it when they learn to make independent decisions instead of waiting for strict instructions. Curiosity shows up when students look past their

immediate assignments to figure out how workplace systems function in practice. Concern then surfaces as interns actively reconsider their long-term professional trajectories. Students obviously do not use this specific theoretical vocabulary during interviews. However, their raw accounts demonstrate a clear, gradual adjustment to professional expectations (Wang et al., 2026). The following sections map these four CCT dimensions directly onto the different phases of the internship experience.

5.2 Developing Confidence Through Real Work Participation

Confidence shifts from a fragile academic concept into a functional resource. Participants reported high hesitation at first. The problem was rarely a lack of theoretical knowledge. It traced back to an application gap common in the Kazakhstani educational system. Students learn to be excellent academic consumers, but they get almost zero practice acting as professional producers. This creates a kind of paralysis when tasks finally have actual consequences. In academic settings, errors carry bounded consequences — a lower grade, a chance to resubmit. Internship mistakes have different stakes: a broken system, a confused client, or a poorly managed task affects real people and real workflows. This shift in consequence is what several participants described as the catalyst for taking their work seriously in a way that academic assignments had not required. IT students faced immediate technical risks, like breaking a live system. Business students worried about social or reputational damage, like misinterpreting what a client actually wanted. In Kazakhstan, these internships function as the first real testing ground. The cost of a mistake suddenly shifts from a GPA deduction to a tangible real-world setback.

Time alone did not build this confidence. Students needed to see their work survive in a professional environment. (The key shift happens when moving from passive evaluation to active contribution). The local university system historically relies on a strict hierarchy of assessment. Grades, exams, and compliance with the State Obligatory

Standards of Education dictate everything. Success simply means satisfying an instructor's rubric. When participants suddenly saw their code running in a live company system, or watched a manager use their report to make a decision, their professional identity shifted. This matches global concepts of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Billett, 2011). In this specific regional context, however, it represents a reclamation of agency. For these participants at least, seeing their work used in a professional context — rather than graded by a lecturer — prompted a shift in how they understood their own competence.

This increasing confidence aligns directly with the "Control" dimension of Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005). Students stop relying on external approval to navigate the workplace. The transition stands out because it sharply contrasts with the passive learner role encouraged in many local Higher Education Institutions. Participants actually got comfortable acting on incomplete information. Classrooms rarely cultivate this skill because academic answers are usually pre-defined. Responding to unfamiliarity is a core part of employability (Fugate et al., 2004). Yet Kazakhstani students often only discover this ability during voluntary work, entirely outside their formal degree programs (Oberman et al., 2021; Smith & Curtis, 2020).

The data points to a deeper structural issue. Internships are often the first and only place where a local student's work holds practical value. University programs in Kazakhstan remain highly isolated. They exist in a theoretical vacuum where knowledge is verified through tests but never actually put to work. Confidence acts as a self-rescue mechanism here. Students must independently bridge the gap between their identity as an excellent student and their new role as a capable employee. Confidence in this setting is not just a stable psychological resource. It functions as a context-dependent release from an assessment-heavy culture. The internship provides concrete proof that the student's

knowledge matters outside the classroom. That realization is the primary catalyst for their sense of career readiness.

5.3 Learning to act under unclear expectations

One of the more interesting themes of this research was not actually that students encountered uncertainty in their internships -- which is nothing new to research on higher education -- but what they did in response to it and what that response required of them that they had never learned in university. As academic tasks are marshaled by rubrics, deadlines, and established guidelines of success; the workplace taught that much professional work is not communicated, changing along the way or not explained at all. This difference, however mundane, highlighted something else: attending to a voluntary internship in Kazakhstan, was providing students with an environment, a principle of working that their academic training did not.

What is especially remarkable is that students did not simply wait for an apparent clarification. Instead, they engaged in what one might call interpretive strategies during the internship e.g., using side-by-side comparisons of original and rewritten texts to infer what constituted quality; keeping an eye on colleagues' work or asking specific rather than generic questions. Navigating genuinely ambiguous expectations is qualitatively different from completing a structured assignment — and arguably more difficult to replicate in formal classroom settings, where task parameters are typically pre-defined (Billett, 2011). In this regard, the internship simply provided students with a different kind of learning that they did not receive from their university; this is especially relevant to the Kazakhstani university context, in which university evaluation mainly valued accurate replication of knowledge rather than independent professional judgment (Azhenov et al., 2023), thus leaving students with little experience of unclear expectations before entering the workplace.

This behaviour echoes how curiosity was theorized in Career Construction Theory as an openness to learning - willing to try to understand how the workplace functions and being eager to learn rather than waiting for others to tell you (Savickas, 2005). However, the findings indicated that curiosity was not simply a matter of intellectual interest. It was, rather, a mechanism of survival. Those who failed to develop the interpretive habits that helped students learn how the environment operates remained stuck or underconfident longer, while those who actively tried to understand workplace expectations in non-instructional environment were able to adapt more quickly. It appears that, in career adaptability, curiosity is not only a matter of individual agency; the extent to which it develops may be partially dependent on whether the workplace creates a safe testing ground or a risky one for exploration (Billett, 2011).

Alongside curiosity, participants described a gradual shift toward control — taking responsibility for task completion without waiting for full instructions (Savickas, 2005). Importantly, this did not mean students stopped asking questions. Rather, they learned to combine independent action with targeted clarification, which is itself a professional competency. Previous research supports this, showing that career readiness includes the psychological capacity to function in situations where expectations are not fully pre-defined (Tomlinson, 2017). What this study adds, however, is that this capacity developed not through instruction or reflection exercises, but through repeated exposure to ambiguity over time — students described becoming less anxious about uncertainty not because it disappeared, but because they accumulated evidence that they could manage it.

This also has broader implications. That students had to develop these strategies on their own, without the scaffolding of the institution, begs the following critical question: should Kazakhstani universities be doing any more to prepare students for this professional ambiguity before they have to encounter it by themselves in an unsupervised internship

setting? The results indicate that adaptability is not a trait that a few students are born with, but a skill that can be learned (Fugate et al., 2004) and that, if voluntary internships are presently their primary source of learning, students who are unable to undertake them (through lack of money, networks or field-specific issues) will graduate without it.

5.4 Professional Identity and Career Direction

A finding that emerged is that the development of professional identity on internship is fueled not only by gaining but also by losing; the emphasis in classical literature on internships as the natural confirmation of career choice (Jackson, 2016) may be somewhat misleading, as the data shows. For several individuals, the highest observed change in their “Career Concern” (Savickas, 2005) came from negative confirmation: a conscious adjustment of career plans by learning what situations to steer clear of.

In the Kazakhstani context, where career counseling is often minimal and university majors are sometimes chosen based on state grants rather than personal interest, the internship serves as the first "reality check." Participants described moving from idealized, academic versions of their profession to a "deconstructed" understanding of everyday tasks. Paradoxically, the most concrete representations of identity development occurred among the students who experienced a mismatch. When students identified that some work cultures or tasks were a poor fit with their values, this served as a narrowing process. Those who ‘thinned out by elimination’ were not failing to develop career readiness; instead, they were engaging in a nuanced form of career exploration that is instrumental in developing boundaries (Liu et al., 2023; Tomlinson, 2017).

This shift from idealised expectations to the practical realities of daily professional life also exposed a gap that is specific to the Kazakhstani educational context. While students expected careers to be structured by curricula and major concentration areas, infiltrating the social space of actual practices- meetings, an “official language” spoken on

the turf, office clerks' social etiquette, and a team of bosses- made them experience the dichotomy from “thinking like a student” to “acting like a professional” (Trede et al., 2012). For many students, the “technical” half of their major (code writing, book keeping) sufficed a quarter of what their professions demanded.

Two distinct patterns emerge from the data regarding how internships influenced career direction. For some participants, the experience confirmed and strengthened an existing choice — they left the placement more certain than before. For others, the value came from the opposite: recognising that a particular field or work environment did not suit them. Career Construction Theory frames both as forms of “Concern” (Savickas, 2005) — active reflection on the kind of professional future the student is building toward.

Testing a professional identity forces students to actually reflect on their future. The internship provides the necessary space for this process. (This reflection happens whether the placement confirms a student's trajectory or completely contradicts it). Students in Kazakhstan face a specific structural barrier here. They rarely have the luxury of changing their major once enrolled in a university program. Because of this institutional rigidity, voluntary internships function as the only safe venue for testing a career path.

Professional identity operates as a continuous process of social participation (Wang et al., 2026). Identity development in these transcripts involves actively sorting through the realities of the local labor market. It goes far beyond the basic idea of simply finding oneself in an office. Participants placed a high value on negative confirmation. This specific finding indicates that local Higher Education Institutions need to reconsider how they measure the success of practical experience. A student might leave a placement realizing that a specific industry is a terrible fit. That individual has gained just as much career readiness as someone who discovers their ideal job.

5.5 Structural Conditions Shaping Career Readiness

The findings of this study demonstrate that career readiness is not solely an individual psychological trait but a product of the structural conditions within the Kazakhstani labor market. While individual effort is necessary, the development of adaptability resources (Savickas, 2005) is significantly constrained or enabled by the quality of supervision, communication styles, and the financial frameworks of the internship.

The other common theme was the lack of formal feedback, which students often described as “learning through silence”, or cues. Many Kazakhstani organizations do not formally mentor their supervisors, they are ‘accidental mentors’ who see the intern as an additional pair of hands, rather than a learner. Students had no choice but to find their way through the realities of work without much of the support structure provided by the Western WIL model (Billett, 2011; McHugh, 2017). This lack of structure has pros and cons: it “prolonged adjustment and increased anxiety” (Clarke, 2018) but also caused a “hyper-proactivity”. Students who did well in this research did so by taking the initiative and actively seeking feedback, developing a higher Control and Curiosity than under a more supportive environment.

The prevalence of unpaid internships stands out as a major structural barrier. Employers in Kazakhstan often treat the opportunity to learn as a direct substitute for actual wages. Several participants described their unpaid placements as arrangements where the employer seemed to view the opportunity to observe as compensation in itself — a dynamic that positioned the internship as a favour granted to the student rather than a mutual exchange of labour and learning.

Payment serves as more than just a financial necessity. It provides symbolic validation of a student's professional contribution. A salary proves that a student's skills

hold actual market value, which directly drives confidence. (The flip side of this creates a massive structural gap). Unpaid work dominates the market. Because these opportunities are heavily concentrated in major hubs like Almaty and Astana, the lack of compensation locks out students from lower-income backgrounds or distant regions. Career readiness in the current Kazakhstani landscape is not a meritocratic achievement. It is often a status bought by those who can afford to work for free (Crain, 2016; Hora et al., 2020).

Structured workplace learning rarely integrates directly into the Kazakhstani higher education system. This forces the student to carry the entire burden of structuring their own experience. Participants do not just passively occupy an office environment. They have to actively negotiate their place within it. This reality strips away the idea of a guided educational transition. The internship becomes a high-stakes encounter with an unregulated local market.

The data points to a highly resource-intensive model of career readiness. Developing the adaptability described by Savickas (2005) requires more than just individual motivation. Students must possess the social and financial capital to survive unpaid, unstructured, and high-pressure environments. Policy intervention is necessary here. Professional development currently functions as a privilege reserved for a select few rather than a standard component of higher education (Peersia et al., 2024; Stirling et al., 2016).

5.6 Career Readiness through Voluntary Internships in Kazakhstan

This study makes three key contributions to understanding career readiness in the context of voluntary internships.

First, the findings extend Career Construction Theory by showing that adaptability resources do not develop as separate or sequential dimensions. While CCT conceptualises confidence, control, curiosity, and concern as distinct resources (Savickas, 2005),

participants in this study described these processes as interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Students often referred to multiple forms of development simultaneously, such as becoming more confident while also learning to act independently and reconsidering their future career direction. This suggests that career readiness develops through overlapping experiences rather than through clearly defined stages, refining existing theoretical assumptions.

Second, the results elucidate the significance of context for the development of career readiness. In the context of Kazakhstan, where structured pathways of work-integrated learning may not always be regularly integrated into university curricula, voluntary internships seem to be compensating for this gap. They offer students the necessity to gain workplace experience that is vital for acquiring the understanding of workplace expectations, and utilizing knowledge in work settings (Billett, 2011; Clarke, 2018; Kolb, 1984). Consequently, voluntary internships act less as a supplement but more as the primary site for transition-to-work preparedness.

Third, this research makes an argument for negative confirmation as a significant, yet largely neglected, outcome of internship experience. Although the majority of research on internship experience highlights it as an opportunity for the validation of career choice, the results suggest that the students gained a degree of preparedness by identifying what kinds of work situation did not meet their expectations. In this way, falling short of ideal realities appears to be beneficial in helping students make more realistic and reasoned career choices, at least in the beginning.

Overall, these findings suggest that career readiness develops through the interaction between individual engagement and contextual conditions. Voluntary internships provide a critical space in which students learn to navigate uncertainty, test

their abilities, and construct their understanding of professional life within the specific context of Kazakhstan (Savickas, 2005).

Summary

Viewed holistically, the results discussed in this chapter underscore something that does not seem to be fully addressed in the existing WIL or CCT literature: career preparedness in the voluntary internship setting is not simply cumulative of experience-this is not what students gain from tasks-but instead constructed through repeated encounters of conditions absent in formal schooling. It was not the completion of tasks that made students confident, adaptable, and develop a professional identity; it was the fact that the tasks had tangible consequences, expectations were implicit, feedback was absent or unreliable, and there was no institutional safety net to contain their mistakes. It was this very unscaffolded nature of voluntary internships that made them formative.

The data clearly demonstrates that the four adaptability dimensions of CCT do not evolve as separate, linear steps. They rarely follow a clean progression. Instead, these resources emerge simultaneously from the exact same experience. When a student manages an ill-defined task, they exercise curiosity to decode the expectations. They build control by deciding how to proceed without formal instructions. The process simultaneously generates confidence because the student learns they can succeed without a rigid guide. These dimensions unfold in concert. The traditional CCT framework might actually underestimate how quickly these traits fuse together in the field.

A specific structural tension emerges regarding the Kazakhstani setting. Local university programs rarely build practical work experience directly into the curriculum. Because of this gap, voluntary internships stop functioning as optional resume enhancements. They act as the primary, and sometimes only, environment where students acquire basic professional survival skills. Participation is not just a matter of individual

ambition. It is a fundamental issue of educational equality. Students without the financial backing to work for free, or the social networks to secure a placement, face a severe disadvantage. They graduate missing the exact core competencies that their peers developed and their universities completely overlooked.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This last chapter presents the main conclusions of the study and shows how they relate to the research questions. The study investigated how undergraduate students describe voluntary internships in terms of their contribution to career readiness in Kazakhstan. The chapter also reflects on the significance of the findings for the body of related research and considers potential implications for higher education practice. Finally, study limitations and suggestions for further research are offered.

6.1 Summary of the Major Findings

This research investigated how undergraduate students define the importance of voluntary internship experience in the formation of career readiness in the context of Kazakhstan. The results indicate that career readiness is not an end in itself, acquired when students graduate, but a ‘shortening’ of the time within which the student can adapt to a new work environment and perform reliably. Career readiness, as participants described it, is not a threshold students cross at graduation but a gradual process that develops through repeated engagement with real professional tasks.

A key insight from this research is that students gained confidence by doing meaningful work rather than preparing for it. Students did not report that they ever felt confident at the start of their internship. Rather, there was a recurring theme in their reports of uneasiness, fear of failure and doubts about their competence to act in a real organisational environment. Confidence clearly grew as students engaged in work that was

tangible, purposeful and consequential. Notable here was the extent to which students' feeling of confirmation and self-assurance increased when their work was accepted, utilised and trusted by others. This suggests that confidence grew not from being told they were performing well, but from seeing their work used, trusted, or built upon by others — a distinction between external validation and evidence of actual contribution. This is consistent with prior self-efficacy literature in professional education (Bandura, 1997; Billett, 2011).

Another significant result concerns the students' capacity to adapt to situations where expectations are not necessarily specified. None of the interviewees work in all their tasks without structure; however, participants repeatedly commented on the contrast they saw between school assignments, which are clearcut, and work documents, which are more ambiguous. Pupils felt unsure of how to proceed when they first were given a task, feeling unsure of the expectations of what he/she was supposed to do, or how much variation he/she should include. A few weeks later the intern had taken measures to adapt to this silent writing, sometimes through asking questions, copying what fellow students or mentors did, or by reading back over earlier work to reveal what he/she would do next. This shows that learning involved not only formal forms of feedback, but also ongoing developments of the interpretation of expectations in ambiguous situations. This is consistent with existing research on the importance of experience in developing a more sophisticated mode of work placement reasoning (Billett, 2011; Fugate et al., 2004).

The results also indicate that internships contributed to students' understanding of future career plans, by shifting the understanding of future work from vague or idealistic representations to a more pragmatic recognition of the day-to-day realities of different careers. In particular, internship experiences seemed to help clarify or reconfirm students' career choice, and through such clarification processes, students could identify what

careers or working conditions are not suitable for them, thus making more informed career decisions. Previous research has found that work experience enhances work-related career decision-making self-efficacy (Liu et al., 2023), and the findings from this study also support this finding by indicating that career development may involve not only confirmation of choices but also exclusion of alternatives.

Apart from individual learning experiences, the results bring attention to the internship conditions that impact upon development of career readiness. Participants discussed how supervision, communication, and availability of feedback impacted upon the comfort levels experienced and level of confidence when performing tasks. Support and clear communication eased adjustments and contributed toward higher levels of confidence, whereas lack of communication, and uncertainty of expectations, diminished ability to evaluate performance. These results mirror prior studies which report workplace learning outcomes as depending upon quality of supervision and feedback (Billett, 2011; Clarke, 2018). Financial realities dictate who actually gets to participate in these spaces. Unpaid roles force participants to juggle heavy academic schedules with basic economic survival. (This naturally creates a system where access to professional development is fundamentally unequal).

The data shows that career readiness requires more than just applying academic theories. It demands active interaction with a live context. Students do not simply transfer existing knowledge into a new building. They learn how to function by executing authentic tasks, decoding unwritten office rules, and adjusting to the environment in real time.

For students in Kazakhstan, this adaptation relies almost entirely on voluntary placements. Local universities rarely build structured workplace learning into their actual degree requirements. Because formal programs ignore this practical step, the voluntary internship becomes the only real bridge to the labor market. Career preparation does not

come from classroom training alone. It is built directly through the friction of these external experiences, making them the central mechanism for any successful university-to-work transition.

6.2 Contribution of the Study

This study offers three specific contributions to the literature on career readiness, work-integrated learning, and Career Construction Theory. The analysis moves past generic observations to map the exact dynamics of the local labor market.

The first contribution is theoretical. It redefines how adaptability resources operate within CCT (Savickas, 2005) when institutional support is practically non-existent. Existing literature usually treats concern, control, curiosity, and confidence as related but distinct traits. In environments with formal work-integrated learning, these dimensions typically develop in sequence. In more structured environments, CCT suggests these resources develop in sequence — curiosity building toward control, for example (Savickas, 2005). Among the participants in this study, the four CCT resources did not develop in sequence. The absence of institutional scaffolding appeared to compress the process, pushing students to develop multiple adaptability resources simultaneously simply to function in the workplace. Because internships lack university oversight, participants must trigger all four resources simultaneously just to survive the unregulated workplace. The less structured the environment, the more compressed the development of these resources becomes. This finding extends CCT well beyond its standard application in highly regulated Western educational models.

The second contribution is contextual. The study identifies voluntary internships as a primary substitute for formal education rather than a supplementary bonus. Global models usually frame internships as a bridge connecting theory to practice (Billett, 2011; Clarke, 2018). The local reality looks completely different. A massive disconnect exists

between university curricula and actual market demands. Because of this gap, the internship often serves as the only real site of professional socialization. The work does not just enhance academic learning. It replaces it entirely. The burden of career readiness shifts away from the university and falls completely on the individual student.

The third contribution is empirical. The text establishes "negative confirmation" as a highly valuable outcome. Most research frames internships as tools to help students find their true path (Liu et al., 2023). However, Kazakhstani students frequently choose their initial university majors based on parental pressure or social necessity. For them, the most important knowledge gained from an internship is often discovering exactly what they do not want to do. They learn how to safely eliminate specific industries. Career readiness therefore requires a broader metric. It should be measured not just by the certainty of a final career choice, but by a student's ability to cut away bad options through practical exposure. This metric matters heavily in fluid labor markets where early-career pivots are normal but rarely documented.

Taken together, these points prove that career readiness is not a universal psychological state. It is a highly specific process shaped directly by structural educational gaps. Voluntary internships act as the mechanism students use to independently compensate for those systemic failures. Career construction transforms from a guided academic journey into an act of self-rescue.

6.3 Implications for Practice and Policy

These findings carry direct implications for local higher education institutions, career services, and national policy. The central implication for practice is that the gap between what universities currently teach and what the local labour market demands needs to be addressed through deliberate curricular and policy intervention, not left to individual students to navigate on their own.

First, universities need to move past the theory-heavy approach mandated by the State Obligatory Standards of Education (GOSO). Graduates are currently entering high-context corporate environments with almost no formal onboarding. Institutions can use their existing elective components to address this reality. Rather than offering generic soft skills modules, they should introduce courses focused strictly on local workplace literacy. Students need to learn how to interpret indirect feedback and extract guidance from hierarchical managers who rarely provide explicit instructions. Furthermore, the mandatory "Professional Practice" (профессиональная практика) requires a complete overhaul. It currently functions as a bureaucratic, paper-filling exercise. It should operate as a reflection-based credit system that actively rewards a student's ability to navigate professional ambiguity (Billett, 2011).

Second, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education must address the socio-economic divide fueled by unpaid labor. The national "Roadmap for Employment" (Дорожная карта занятости) currently targets graduates, leaving active students to finance their own professional development. Because competitive private-sector internships in Almaty largely remain unpaid, students from lower-income backgrounds or rural regions face an immediate disadvantage. Policy interventions should target this exact bottleneck. The government could offer tax incentives to local SMEs that provide paid, validated placements. State Educational Grants could expand to fund short-term, project-based micro-internships. Most importantly, the Labor Code needs to formalize the legal status of an "Intern." This ensures that voluntary work functions as a protected learning period rather than a source of easily exploited free labor.

Third, university Career Centers must change their operational model. They currently function strictly as placement offices, chasing high employment metrics to satisfy Ministry KPIs. They need to become reflective hubs that actually value negative

confirmation. Acknowledging a career mismatch represents a major step in professional development (Liu et al., 2023). Career Centers should run structured post-internship debriefs where students analyze exactly why specific industries failed to align with their expectations. This practice matters heavily in Kazakhstan, where strong parental pressure often forces students into traditional law or accounting tracks. Allowing students to fail fast during their university years prevents massive structural burnout in these professions later on.

More generally, these implications highlight the need for a transition from quantity-based (number of internship agreements) to quality-based approaches when it comes to the career readiness of CEE students in Kazakhstan. This would include an overhaul of the way in which their preparation for, support in, and most crucially assessment of their experiences takes place, within the context of the country-specific socio-economic conditions of the Kazakhstani market.

6.4 Limitations of the Study

This study has a few limitations that need to be taken into account before the results are used as a basis for further study. The sample of eight participants was selected purposively to generate rich, contextually grounded data rather than to support statistical generalisation. While the findings cannot be extended to all Kazakhstani students, they offer transferable insights — particularly for researchers and practitioners working in comparable post-Soviet educational contexts

Secondly, the participants were selected through purposive sampling. Therefore students who volunteered to participate may have been more motivated or more reflexive about their experience, affecting the extent to which the results reflect the student body at large.

Thirdly, the research only looks at student perspectives. It does not examine how employees or supervisors might expect things to be like in the workplace and this meant the researcher was unable to compare between how different actors expected work to be like.

Finally, the sample was populated mainly by students in the fields of IT and business. Consequently, there may have been a lack of generalisation in the results as students in other fields may have had different internship experiences.

Finally, the researcher's own internship experience may have impacted on the analysis of data. Despite attempts to be as grounded in participants' accounts as possible, the researcher cannot be separated entirely from her own experience and this is an additional limitation.

6.5 Directions for Future Research

There are several ways in which future research can expand upon this study. For the scope of this study, college students' experiences were studied, so future studies may involve employers/supervisors and study how expectations are set on both sides. This may shed light on the gap in this study where students were shown to interpret implied expectations rather than be directly told expectations.

Secondly, the investigation in the future may study on how the internship experiences vary in terms of department, university, and so on. Since this study focused on IT and business students, future research could examine how voluntary internship experiences compare across other disciplines — particularly those where industry placements are less common, such as the humanities or natural sciences.

Third, there is opportunity for future, longitudinal research to investigate links between internship experiences and students' career development over time. This study captured students' retrospective reflections about internship learning while they were still

immersed in their internship. Future studies could investigate the long-term impacts of internships on students' career paths.

Finally, other directions of future research may include examining structural impediments to internship participation, such as financial resources. Since this research shed light on the difficulties posed by unpaid internships, future research may explore whether access to internship type is stratified by socio-economic status and how this impacts career readiness.

6.6 Personal Reflection

This research topic was personally significant to me. Like several of the participants, I completed internships during my studies and experienced firsthand the gap between university learning and workplace expectations. Certain duties, communication patterns, and day-to-day realities only became clear once I was working in an actual professional environment. The experience also prompted me to reconsider my initial career direction — I had originally studied Oriental Studies before moving into education, and it was partly through internship experience that I came to understand that an education career was a better fit for me.

Conducting this research confirmed that what I experienced was not unique. Participants described similar processes of gradual clarification — adjusting expectations, discovering what suited them, and building confidence through practical exposure rather than academic preparation.

At the same time, having my own internship experience made it important to stay close to participants' actual words during analysis and avoid projecting my perspective onto their accounts.

Overall, this thesis deepened my understanding of how students navigate the transition from university to work, and strengthened my interest in career development and

higher education research. I hope the findings contribute to a better understanding of how practical experience shapes students' sense of readiness.

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Appendix A: AI Declaration Form



Thesis Title:

Declaration of the Use of Generative AI

I hereby declare that I have read and understood NUGSE's policy concerning appropriate use of AI and composed this work independently (please check one):

☒ with the use of artificial intelligence tools, or

☐ without the use of artificial intelligence tools.

(If you have used AI tools as defined in the GSE policy document, please complete the rest of this form.)

During the preparation of this thesis/examination, I used Chat gpt, grammarly ai
[NAME of TOOL] to _____ check grammar, structure and organize the written text / edit
the text for clarity and grammar / and brainstorm_____ [REASON]¹.

I also declare that I

☒ am aware of the capabilities and limitations of AI tool(s),

☒ have verified that the content generated by AI systems and adopted by me is factually correct,

☒ am aware that as the author of this thesis I bear full responsibility for the statements and assertions made in it,

☒ have submitted complete and accurate information about my use of AI tools in this work, and

☒ acknowledge that there may be disciplinary consequences if I have not followed NUGSE's guidelines regarding appropriate AI use.

Name: Dayana Abutalipova

Signature:

Date: 27.04.2026

Appendix B: Informed Consent

Introduction. You are invited to participate in a research study entitled “Career Readiness Through Voluntary Internships: Undergraduate Student Perspectives”.

Procedures. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in one individual, semi-structured interview. The interview will be conducted online using a secure videoconferencing platform (e.g., Zoom or Microsoft Teams), in English, Kazakh, or Russian, according to your preference. The interview will last approximately 30–45 minutes. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Risks. The study involves minimal risk. Some participants may feel mild discomfort when reflecting on personal experiences. To reduce these risks, you may skip any question you do not wish to answer or withdraw at any time without penalty.

Benefits. While there are no direct material benefits, participation may help you reflect on your career development. The study will contribute to understanding how voluntary internships shape career readiness in Kazakhstan and may help universities improve career services, as well as provide scholars with new insights into how readiness develops through experience and reflection.

Compensation. No financial or material compensation will be provided. However, participants may request a summary of the research findings once the study is completed.

Confidentiality & Privacy. All efforts will be made to keep your information confidential. Because interviews involve direct interaction, complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed. However, your data will be anonymized:

- You will be assigned a pseudonym or code (e.g., P01).
- No identifying information (such as names, student IDs, phone numbers, or internship organizations) will appear in transcripts, reports, or publications.
- Audio recordings and transcripts will be stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher and her supervisor.

Only the researcher will know the identities of the participants. Audio recordings and transcripts will be stored in password-protected files, accessible only to the researcher and her supervisor. All identifying information will be removed during transcription, and only anonymized data will be used in the final reports.

Voluntary Nature of the Study. Participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and if agreement to participation is given, it can be withdrawn at any time without prejudice.

Points of Contact. It is understood that should any questions or comments arise regarding this project, or a research related injury is received. In that case, please contact Dayana Abutalipova, dayana.abutalipova@nu.edu.kz For concerns about your rights as a participant, you may contact the Nazarbayev University Institutional Research Ethics Committee at resethics@nu.edu.kz

.Statement of Consent.

By replying “I agree” to this message, you confirm that you are at least 18 years old, have read and understood this consent form, and agree to participate in this research study.

Appendix C: Recruitment Letter

Subject: Invitation to participate in a research study on voluntary internships

Dear students,

If you:

- are an undergraduate student in Kazakhstan (studying in the **IT Faculty** or the **Business Faculty**),
- are 18 years old or older,
- have completed at least one voluntary internship (**except** the mandatory practice placements required by your program),

...I would love to invite you to participate in an interview for my research study. The study examines how voluntary internships shape students' career readiness in Kazakhstan.

Your involvement would be very much appreciated and could help deepen understanding of how students from IT and Business faculties reflect on professional growth, identity, and skills through voluntary internships.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and will remain confidential.

If you fit the requirements and would like to contribute to this study, please email me at **dayana.abutalipova@nu.edu.kz** or +77055476327 (WhatsApp/Telegram) to confirm your participation or learn more.

Thank you for considering this opportunity to support my research.

Sincerely,

Dayana Abutalipova

Master's Student, Graduate School of Education

Nazarbayev University

Appendix D: Gatekeeper Letter

To: [Name / Position of University Administration Representative]

From: Dayana Abutalipova, Master's Student

Graduate School of Education, Nazarbayev University

Subject: Request for Permission to Conduct Research Study

Dear [Title + Last Name],

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study as part of my Master's thesis at Nazarbayev University. The study is titled: *Career Readiness Through Voluntary Internships: Undergraduate Student Perspectives*.

The purpose of this study is to explore how undergraduate students perceive their career readiness after completing voluntary internships. The study will involve semi-structured online interviews (30–45 minutes) with approximately 10–12 undergraduate students who have completed at least one voluntary internship. Participation will be entirely voluntary and confidential.

If permission is granted, I will coordinate with relevant departments (such as the Career Center and program coordinators) to share the recruitment letter and information sheet with students who may be eligible to participate. No disruption to university processes is expected, and all ethical standards approved by the Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC) at Nazarbayev University will be strictly followed.

I would be grateful for your support in granting permission to carry out this research within your institution. Please let me know if further documentation or clarification is required.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Dayana Abutalipova

Master's Student, Graduate School of Education

Nazarbayev University

Email: dayana.abutalipova@nu.edu.kz

Appendix E: Interview Protocol

General Background Information

Can you introduce yourself: your age, major, and the language(s) you are most comfortable with?

Have you ever taken part in internships before this voluntary one? If yes, which type (mandatory/voluntary)?

Motivations and Expectations

What motivated you to take part in a voluntary internship?

What were your expectations before starting it?

Internship Experience

What kinds of tasks and responsibilities did you have?

How did supervision, feedback, or support influence your experience?

Can you describe a specific challenge you faced during your internship and how you dealt with it?

Reflections and Learning

In what ways did this internship affect your confidence, adaptability, or skills?

Did it change how you see yourself as a future professional? If so, how?

Looking back, what aspects of the internship were most valuable or least valuable for you?

Closing

How do you think voluntary internships, in general, contribute to students' career readiness?

Is there anything else you would like to add about your internship experience?

Appendix F: Data Analysis – Transcript and Coding Samples

The table presents selected transcript excerpts with interpretive codes and themes developed through inductive, iterative analysis. Codes were progressively refined and grouped into broader patterns as described in Chapter 3; the table illustrates key examples from each theme rather than representing the full coding process.

Participant extract	Initial code	Theme
"I didn't really want to take anything serious because I was thinking, what if I break something. It's not like uni tasks, here it actually matters." (P6, IT)	real consequences, fear of acting	Readiness as Reduced Fear and Increased Confidence
"Then later it's just... normal. If you don't get something, you ask. At first I thought you need to show that you know everything, but actually no one expects that. So after some time you just stop stressing about it that much." (P5, IT)	stopped worrying about looking incompetent	Readiness as Reduced Fear and Increased Confidence
"We studied it, so I thought I know it. But when I came there, it didn't feel like I know it anymore. Like I understand the idea, but I don't know what exactly to do with it. So, I had to ask and kind of learn again, but differently." (P1, IT)	knew the theory, lost on the job	Readiness as Confronting the Theory–Practice Gap

Participant extract	Initial code	Theme
"At first I thought I would enjoy this, because it sounds good on paper. But when I started working, I realised it's not something I want long-term. It's not even about difficulty, just... I didn't like the process itself." (P8, Business)	internship showing what you don't want	Readiness as Career Direction Clarification and Reorientation
"You ask one person, they tell you one thing. Then someone else says something different. And you're thinking... okay, so what do I follow now?" (P2, Business)	different people, different instructions	Readiness as Navigating Uncertainty
"He didn't solve it for me, but he showed like... where this part connects, why it's written like that. And after that it kind of clicked." (P7, IT)	mentor guided thinking, not just gave answers	Internship Conditions That Shape Readiness Development
"I pushed it, and I thought okay, done. Then later I opened it again and... it wasn't the same. Not like everything changed, just small things. And no one told me anything. So I was just sitting there like, okay... what exactly did I do wrong here." (P5, IT)	work changed without explanation, had to guess why	Internship Conditions That Shape Readiness Development

Participant extract	Initial code	Theme
"Even small things take time, like writing a message. You read it again, change a few words, then again. Not because someone said anything, but you just don't know what sounds normal there." (P2, Business)	unsure how to sound normal at work	Internship Conditions That Shape Readiness Development
"At some point I wanted to quit. Especially when you're tired and you realise it's unpaid. Sometimes you think, I could be using this time to earn something. It's not about wanting money — it's about feeling that your time has value."	unpaid work, time felt not valued	Internship Conditions That Shape Readiness Development
"When they gave me a normal task, like a team member, that changed everything." (P5, IT)	treated as team member, not intern	Impact of Voluntary Internships on Confidence, Skills, and Identity
"There was a meeting where they were discussing something, and I actually understood what they were talking about... And then later I also said something, just a small comment, but they reacted to it normally. Not like 'you're an intern', just like part of discussion." (P5, IT)	comment accepted in meeting, felt part of it	Impact of Voluntary Internships on Confidence, Skills, and Identity

Participant extract	Initial code	Theme
"After working there, I realised this environment is not for me... Now I know what kind of place I don't want." (P8, Business)	knows what kind of workplace to avoid	Impact of Voluntary Internships on Confidence, Skills, and Identity