A Conceptual Framework for Internship-Driven Skill Development and Workforce Preparedness under NEP-2020 in Indian Higher Education

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Abstract:

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) signifies a major revolution in higher education in India, making experiential learning compulsory through the institution of mandatory internship programs. Even though there is a full-fledged policy framework based on empirical research, evidence on its implementation and outcomes at student level is scarce. This paper presents a conceptual framework hypothesizing how Internship Program Implementation (IPI) affects Workforce Preparedness (WP), with its impact mediated by Student Internship Experience (SIE) and Skill and Employability Development (SED). Accessibility and Challenges (AC) has been conceptualized as a barrier construct; it acts as an endogen variable negatively determined by IPI as well as impacting negatively on SED and independently influencing SIE quality. The literature also surveys international evidence from Germany, Australia, the UK, and the USA as well as some of the emerging Indian literature on the application of NEP 2020. The proposed framework, comprising five latent constructs and thirty-six indicators, advances the theoretical understanding of internship effectiveness and offers actionable recommendations for institutional policy and curriculum design. Future empirical validation using SEM is proposed as the next stage of research. The paper argues that skill development and lifelong learning — a core theme of the conference — are best realised when internship governance, experiential quality, and institutional accessibility are jointly optimised.

1. Introduction:

The labor market in the world today requires graduates who have not only excelled academically but are flexible, skilled, and ready for the job market (World Economic Forum, 2023). This means that students today must acquire academic and practical education and experience the importance internships and work-integrated learning (WIL) programs have gained in modern higher education. Germany's dual vocational training system (Duales Ausbildungssystem), compulsory WIL programs in Australia, and degree apprenticeships in the UK are good examples of how innovative educational policies allow for the intergration of work-based educational programs and initiatives (Patrick et al., 2008; Rowe et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2014).

Through the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP-2020), India has begun its journey towards a similar series of reforms. The NEP 2020 demands that internship and field learning be included in the undergraduate and post-graduate programs so that students can connect theory studied in classrooms with the reality of the workplace. The Gujarat-based Knowledge Consortium of Gujarat (KCG) has also published the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)

necessary for NEP 2020 in the higher education institutions of Gujarat, making it mandatory for the universities to set up internship cells, initiate the establishment of industry collaborations and formalize credit allocation for experiential learning.

However, even with such aspirations, from the point of view of implementation, there are multiple issues. A lot of institutions of higher education, especially those enrolling students from rural and socio-economically backward areas, face issues such as a lack of sufficient linkages to the industry, relatively weak advisory, low chances of students' participation, and varying quality of internships.

The article proposes a conceptual framework that connects five important constructs: Internship Programme Implementation (IPI), Student Internship Experience (SIE), Accessibility and Challenges (AC), Skill and Employability Development (SED), and Workforce Preparedness (WP). Inspiration for this framework comes from three key theoretical traditions – Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), Human Capital Theory (HCT), and Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). Besides, the framework is based on both international literature and examples of using the discussed framework in India. One of the important contributors the article claims for is that it presents only the conceptual contribution of relational constructs put forward and that it will be implemented in the future empirical study.

The paper fits into the framework of Skill Development and Lifelong Learning conference theme within Track 4: Education, Psychology and Human Development as it affects the understanding of the way institutional internship governance is able to provide long-lasting and transferable skills pressing into a modern knowledge-based economy.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Experiential Learning Theory (ELT)

According to Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory of 1984 learning is something that is long-lasting and happens through a cycle of four main processes including concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Internships are great examples of experiential learning since they give students valuable in-the-field experience to think about and apply later on. Barr, Nabi, and Andrei in their longitudinal research on work-based programs in software engineering show how important reflective practice is because it improves professional judgment and the use of knowledge in practice. This finding agrees with Kolb's concept and confirms that SIE is a major mediating tool in the current framework.

2.2 Human Capital Theory (HCT)

According to Becker's Human Capital Theory (1964), the concepts of education and training are regarded as an investment aimed at boosting one's productivity and earnings in the labour market. In this light, internships can be viewed as a type of specific human capital acquisition because one develops job-specific knowledge and skills, as well as industry-specific networks, in order to become more employable and earn more money after graduation (Nunley et al., 2016). This position is supported in the Indian context by Shivalingappa (2025), who points out that participation in internships and WIL contributes to better career outcomes for students, including higher job readiness and smoother transition from school to work. The fact that NEP-2020 promotes credit-bearing internships shows that the theory treats experiential capital acquisition within the framework of degree studies as a standard practice.

2.3 Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) Theory

The Work-Integrated Learning theory, which was developed in Australia (Patrick et al., 2008; Billett, 2011), defines learning as a co-created activity that takes place where the university, workplace, and individual interact with each other. The research supports the view that supervision quality, task assigned, mentoring interaction, and objectives of curricula are important criteria for success in carrying out internships (Rowe et al., 2012). This information will therefore be considered when creating the SIE and IPI concepts in the proposed model. The assumption about the negative link between IPI and AC also stems from the WIL theory's claim that an effective programme design helps to eliminate obstacles to participation in the internship process.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 International Evidence on Internship Effectiveness

Around the globe, scholars uphold the effectiveness of internship programs in boosting the employability of university graduates. In the U.S., for example, Nunley et al. (2016) conducted a study involving the audit of resumes of numerous candidates and discovered that having gone through internship programs greatly increases interview invitations as employers seem to favor people who have work experience in their application. Similarly, Mansfield and Warwick (2005) confirmed the findings when studying engineering graduates in the U.K. and found that practical work placements improved graduates' technical abilities, confidence, and employer perception of readiness in a significant manner.

The authors performed extensive research into WIL in Australia. Rowe et al. (2012) examined a variety of educational disciplines and found out that structured, curriculum-based work placements with precisely defined learning objectives and mentoring from the faculty are much more effective than conventional internship placements.

The dual system of education in Germany is considered one of the most sophisticated forms of combining education and work. According to Smith et al. (2014) Germany has developed a system of apprenticeship programmes, which result in low youth unemployment rates thanks to the fact that vocational training is included in the network of employers with quality regulated by law. The success of the German model can be largely attributed to what this framework refers to as IPI (implementation of guidelines) — the structural aspect, mentor support, evaluation, and cooperation with the industry.

The introduction of degree apprenticeship in the UK after 2015 has demonstrated that the integration of study with work practice has a positive effect on such indicators as graduate performance and job satisfaction (Bravenboer & Lester, 2016). Also, Jackson (2015) conducted a review of WIL in a number of disciplines and countries and conclude that WIL education improves the communication skills of students, ability to work in a team and to solve problems, as well as develop a professional identity.

3.2 Indian Evidence in the NEP-2020 Context

Research on internships in Indian higher education is new yet increasing even further after the implementation of NEP-2020. In the research by Reddy and Mohan (2025), conducted through the frameworks of NEP-2020 and NCF-2023, the authors concluded that enhanced employability due to improved problem-solving, communication, and workplace adaptability skills is influenced by vocational integration and experiential learning. The results contribute to providing empirical basis for SIE → SED relationship stated in theory in this study.

It was found by Yadav and Verma (2025) that organized experience offered by internships, projects, and community service leads to the enhancement of adaptability, communication, and problem-solving, which, in turn, corresponds to the notion of SED in the current study. These findings are consistent with the idea promoted in NEP-2020 about experiential and vocational learning being part of the undergraduate curricula.

Daryal and Sharma (2025) in their review of NEP-2020 internship execution showed that there are gaps in the involvement of the industry and the involvement of students. They suggest that the support offered by different institutions needs to be improved for an efficient learning experience. The proposed findings aid in explaining the concept of IPI → AC in this paper, which emphasizes that if internship programs are effectively executed, there would be minimum institutional and structural barriers.

Ashutosh et al. (2025) investigated student perceptions about internships in tourism and hospitality among vocational students in India and observed multiple access, relevance, and

supervision challenges affecting their educational process. This clearly matches the concept of AC in the paper and indicates the significant governance issues that good IPI level can resolve.

Shivalingappa (2025) offers one of the most thorough analyses in Indian circumstances presenting the idea that internships and WIL can improve employment and early career opportunities through direct skill development, professional identity formation, and creating connections. This logic also justifies the use of the SEM framework offered in the paper.

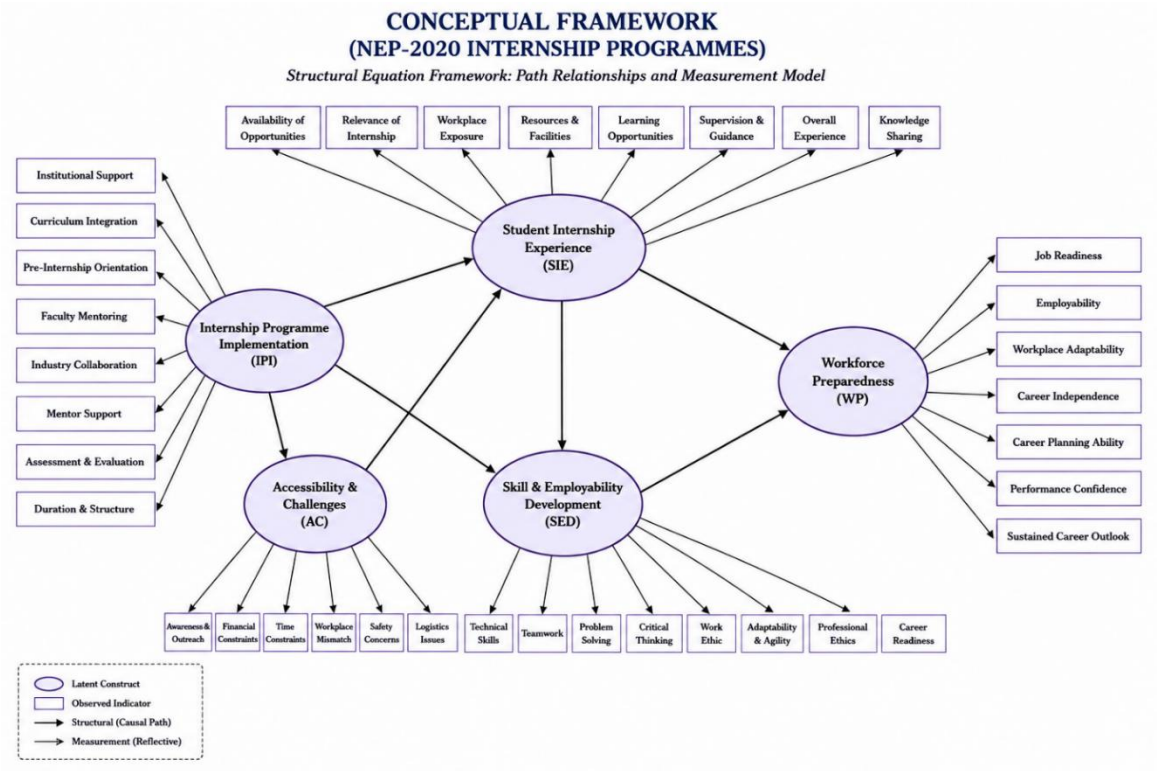
3.3 NEP-2020 and the Internship Mandate

NEP-2020 signifies a shift in the method of pursuing education in India. The policy wishes the implementation of a four-year undergraduate programme with numerous entry and exit options. To this end, NEP-2020 promotes vocational education, internships, social work, and project-based learning as part and parcel of every undergraduate student's training (Ministry of Education, 2020). The authors foresee that every undergraduate student will undergo at least one internship, which requires universities to put in place relevant programs, like internship offices, relations with social organizations, guides, and credit assignment systems.

KCG made this idea come true in Gujarat's educational institutions by implementing detailed SOPs regarding allocation of credits for internships, the role of educational institutions, support roles and assessment systems.

4. The Conceptual Framework

The proposed conceptual framework (see Figure 1) is a five-construct, theoretically testable structural model that articulates how institutional internship governance (IPI) is hypothesised to shape student-level outcomes (WP) through two sequential mediating pathways: Student Internship Experience (SIE) and Skill and Employability Development (SED). Accessibility and Challenges (AC) is conceptualised as an endogenous barrier construct — predicted negatively by IPI and negatively predicting SED, while also independently influencing SIE. The framework is grounded in the three theoretical traditions reviewed above and operationalised with thirty-six observed indicators across five latent constructs (IPI: 8; SIE: 8; AC: 5; SED: 8; WP: 7).



[Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework]

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Illustrating Relationships Among IPI, SIE, AC, SED, and WP

4.1 Construct Definitions and Operationalisation

4.1.1 Internship Programme Implementation (IPI)

IPI is the extent to which colleges and universities incorporate structured and quality-based internship governance systems that follow NEP-2020 requirements. IPI has eight different indicators that consists of Institutional Support, Curriculum Integration, Pre-internship Orientation, Faculty Monitoring, Industry Collaboration, Mentor Support, Assessment and Evaluation, along with Duration and Structure. Together, these indicators determine the level of realization of policy intentions at colleges and universities.

According to WIL theory, IPI plays its role that is deemed as the most significant upstream determinant of the quality of internships. The role of IPI is confirmed by hypothesis H1 along with negative prediction of the level of AC students face (H2) and thus direct effect on SED and WP.

4.1.2 Student Internship Experience (SIE)

SIE captures the subjective, learner-centred dimensions of the internship encounter. Its eight indicators — Accessibility of Internship, Relevance of Internship, Workplace Exposure, Mentoring and Feedback, Learning Opportunities, Supportive Environment, Overall Experience, and Meaningful Assignments — reflect Kolb's (1984) concrete experience and reflective observation stages, as well as WIL theory's emphasis on situated, quality-supervised workplace learning (Patrick et al., 2008). SIE is proposed as a mediator of the IPI → WP

relationship: it is expected to be positively influenced by IPI (H1) and, in turn, to positively influence SED (H5) and WP (H6). This proposed mediation pathway operationalises the theoretical mechanism through which institutional governance inputs are expected to be translated into learner-level outcomes.

4.1.3 Accessibility and Challenges (AC)

AC is viewed as an endogenous barrier construct that represents the institutional and contextual barriers hindering students' engagement with and benefitting from their experiences in internship programs. It has five elements - Access to Opportunities, Financial Constraints, Time Constraints, Information Gap, and Other Challenges - which are drawn from empirical research conducted in India (Ashutosh et al., 2025; Daryal & Sharma, 2025) and global equity research (Lawson et al., 2011). The higher the AC score the more barriers the students face. Within this framework, AC has a specific and unique structural position: it is suggested to have a negative relationship with IPI (H2), in the sense that the better the institutional governance the fewer barriers the students face. It is also suggested that AC has a negative effect on SED (H4) because students experiencing more barriers do not gain necessary benefits concerning their skills from internship. Lastly, it is suggested that AC negatively affects the SIE quality (H3) because barriers to accessibility prevent students from receiving rich and diverse internship experience. Thus, AC has a three-dimensional structural role - an outcome of governance, a negative predictor of internship experience quality, and a negative predictor of skill development - which allows it to have explanatory capability within the framework. Here, AC is not modelled as a moderator.

4.1.4 Skill and Employability Development (SED)

The SED has put into place the competencies expected to stem from internships. SED is recognized for having eight learning indicators: Communication Skills, Teamwork, Problem Solving, Critical Thinking, Digital Skills, Leadership Skills, Professional Ethics, and Workplace Confidence. These indicators are connected to the international employers' surveys that address the important skills expected in graduates (Jackson, 2015; World Economic Forum, 2023) as well as the NEP-2020 document. SED is considered an intermediary in relation to the SIE and WP and is supposed to have a positive effect from SIE while having a negative impact on the AC and is then connected directly to WP. In terms of Human Capital Theory, SED can be regarded as the specific investment that will be gained during the internship experience, while the complete mediation of the AC and WP relations can be regarded as the main risk of equity in the suggested model.

4.1.5 Workforce Preparedness (WP)

WP stands for Workforce Preparedness. It can be noted that this is the key outcome construct. It reflects the students' abilities to effectively perform in the working environment right after graduation. There are seven indicators in WP, including Job Readiness, Employability, Workplace Adaptability, Career Preparedness, Career Planning Ability, Professional Confidence, and Sustainable Career Outlook. They cover not only the immediate dimensions of the construct (job readiness, employability) but also the long-term dimensions (career planning, sustainable career outlook). In this connection, it is important to state that there is a wider interpretation of the construct of WP than the narrow interpretation of employability that was envisaged in NEP-2020. It should also be noted that WP is the only endogenous construct in the framework and is expected to be directly affected by SIE (H6) and SED (H7).

4.2 Proposed Structural Relationships and Hypotheses

The framework suggests that there are seven structural hypotheses shown in Table 1. All of the directional hypotheses are theoretical expectations based on the foregoing literature review. The actual SEM assessment has not been made so far.

H	Proposed Pathway	Expected Direction	Theoretical Basis
H1	IPI → SIE	Positive	WIL Theory; ELT (Kolb, 1984)
H2	IPI → AC	Negative (stronger IPI = fewer barriers)	WIL Theory; Daryal & Sharma, 2025
H3	AC → SIE	Negative (greater barriers = lower experience quality)	WIL Theory; Equity Research
H4	AC → SED	Negative (greater barriers = lower skill gain)	HCT; Ashutosh et al., 2025
H5	SIE → SED	Positive	ELT; WIL Theory; Reddy & Mohan, 2025
H6	SIE → WP	Positive	HCT; Shivalingappa, 2025
H7	SED → WP	Positive	HCT; NEP-2020; Jackson, 2015

Table 1: Proposed Hypotheses of the Conceptual Framework

4.3 Proposed Empirical Validation of the Framework

This paper introduces a theoretical framework at the moment where no empirical data has been gathered, and analysis or SEM calculation has been performed. Therefore, no model evaluation statistics, including χ^2/df, CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR, will follow, since it would assume the presence of estimated model. The theoretical framework is achievable with the help

of Structural Equation Modelling with the primary data sample consisting of the students taking NEP-2020-aligned courses in higher education institutions of Vadodara.

The research study has been designed as an empirical study, which involves collecting primary data with the help of structured questionnaire provided to the sample of 384 undergraduates and postgraduates on the basis of quota sampling. The data analysis will be performed in a number of steps: CFA will be used for construct validation, then full SEM analysis will take place with the help of AMOS or SPSS software. The model evaluation will be based on traditional values of model performance, which include $\chi^2/df < 3.0$, CFI and TLI $\geq .90$, RMSEA $< .06$, and SRMR $< .08$ (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Hair et al., 2019).

The Accessibility and Challenges (AC) construct will be treated as an endogenous variable with IPI as its predictor and with its own paths to SIE and SED, as described in the hypotheses above. No interaction terms (moderation) are specified in the current framework, maintaining parsimony and clarity of the structural model.

5. Discussion: Implications for Policy, Practice, and Lifelong Learning

5.1 Implications for Institutional Policy

The core hypothesis of the framework — that IPI is anticipated to play both direct and indirect roles in the determination of WP through the paths of SIE and SED — entails an obligatory institutional policy agenda: quality internship management rather than the very fact of internship participation is posited as the crucial upstream factor influencing the graduate outcomes. This hypothesis corresponds to the findings of Rowe et al. (2012) about WIL in Australia and to those of Mansfield and Warwick (2005) in the UK indicating that structured programme accountability translates into better graduate competencies.

When it comes to Indian higher education institutions implementing the mandates of NEP-2020, the implication presented above is that compliance cannot be narrowly understood as mere initiation of students into the organisations for a certain period of time. Instead, they are to aim at all-inclusive IPI practices including establishing specialised internship centres, forming partnerships with industry, training faculty mentors and providing orientations for students prior to internship programmes. The KCG (2023) SOP framework is an example of a policy architecture already existing, while the current one provides an empirically verifiable measure of its operation.

5.2 Addressing Accessibility and Equity

The purported negative effect of the AC construct on SED and SIE indicates that accessibility obstacles are the greatest equity risk in the execution of internship programmes. The assumption is that pupils belonging to the economically weaker section of society, come

from non-urban regions, and are representative of the first generation to attain higher education would go through greater challenge in terms of finances, information, and logistics in getting internships (Ashutosh et al., 2025). Hence, failing to manage this risk could lead to the internship instrument devised in accordance with the NEP-2020 replacing oppressive structures with new ones.

Some suggestions of the course of action presented by the framework are as follows: offering stipends or negotiating travel reimbursements for students from underprivileged backgrounds; introducing virtual internships that solve the problem of distance; conducting campaigns aimed at raising awareness among first generation applicants; and making sure there are internship reservation systems for vulnerable groups. The assumption about IPI triggering AC implies that successful implementation of internship programmes will help reduce barriers to access.

5.3 Skill Development as Lifelong Learning Infrastructure

The SED model is carefully planned to include not only the present-day working abilities but also the metacognitive and dispositional skills — reasoning, job ethics, self-efficacy, and leadership — which are fundamental to the lifelong learning capability. Reflecting the concept of education which NEP-2020 is based on, this approach aims to develop adaptive, independent learners who can adapt to changing professional environments instead of training specialists for their initial jobs.

International studies support this view. The research by Jackson (2015) showed that the participation in WIL implies increased reflective and metacognitive abilities which allow graduates to learn from their future practical experiences better. The study of Barr et al. (2025) has proven that the incorporation of reflection into work-based learning leads to a bigger level of professional judgment which can be applied in various contexts. The Sustainable Career Outlook indicator within WP reflects this aspect of long-lasting learning — the ability relatively to plan, adapt, and improve throughout one's career rather than just immediately after graduation.

5.4 Comparative Reflections: India and Developed Nations

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6. Theoretical and Practical Contributions

This research provides three major additions to existing literature on internships.

To begin with, the research provides a novel theoretical framework, derived from various theories such as experience learning theory (ELT), human capital theory (HCT), and work integrated learning (WIL) theory, for the study of NEP-2020 implementation with the use of structural equation modeling (SEM). The existing research on internships in India mainly being descriptive or applying simple regression methods, the proposed framework encompasses several types of relationships involved in internship effectiveness.

Secondly, the research suggests that equity and accessibility should be regarded as endogenously formed structural constructs. This approach is groundbreaking in international WIL studies and Indian education, allowing the proposed theoretical framework to be applied for the evaluation of internship effectiveness as well as the equality of NEP-2020 implementation.

Third, the framework is operationalised by defining Workforce Preparedness as a multi-dimensional and temporally-extended concept which includes lifelong learning orientation (Sustainable Career Outlook) and several traditional employability indicators. This approach is closer to NEP 2020 educational philosophy and the theme of the conference in terms of skill development and lifelong learning than more narrow employability-oriented approaches available in the literature.

7. Conclusion

The National Education Policy 2020 has made internship programs central to India's efforts to align higher education with the labor market and global employment standards. However, ambition alone is not enough; achievement largely depends on quality implementation, richness of student experience, and equitable distribution of internship programs across the entire Indian higher education sector.

Therefore, the framework presented in this paper, which relies on five constructs and thirty-six indicators derived from Experiential Learning Theory, Human Capital Theory, and Work-Integrated Learning Theory, allows one to formulate a set of theoretically sound and empirically testable hypotheses on the nature of these relationships. Using data from Germany, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the USA, as well as the new Indian literature prompted by the implementation of the National Education Policy 2020, the research focuses on the manner in which internships governance (IG) leads to the shaping of the student experience (SE), overcoming the barriers in accessibility (BA), acquiring skills (AS), and making students workforce ready (WR). There are seven structural hypotheses in total which are based on theoretical expectations which are to be tested later on by means of empirical research.

The key concept of the framework is that skill development and lifelong learning — that serve as goals of NEP-2020 as well as major topics of the conference — is not necessarily a result of participation in internship programs but is considered to be a result of certain investments made into the process in a quality, accessible manner. In order for India to take its demographic dividend through the highly skilled, flexible and self-confident graduate workforce, the implementation of the internship regulation of NEP-2020 should evolve from following standards to the process of maximizing the learning process for students.

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