

# Industrial Training Program During COVID-19 Pandemic: Perceptions and Challenges

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## Abstract

An industrial training program provides working experience to the final-year students to prepare them for the real world. However, these industrial training students were affected in completing the program when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world from 2020 until 2021. Therefore, this study was conducted to investigate the students' perceptions of the skills required before joining an industrial training program and to find out the challenges industrial training students faced at the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve the

research objectives of this study, a qualitative approach was employed among five industrial training students who had completed their industrial training program during the COVID-19 pandemic. They were interviewed and video-recorded. The data were then analyzed using thematic analysis. The study's findings show that the students valued five specific skills before joining an industrial training program: leadership, proactive, knowledge management, ICT, and communication skills. Meanwhile, there were two significant challenges faced by the students in completing the industrial training program during the COVID-19 pandemic which missed out on the opportunities to gain firsthand knowledge from their managers and coworkers, and also communication issues including in receiving tasks and guidance, as well as immediate feedback from the supervisors. Thus, universities need to offer courses or activities that help students develop relevant skills that are suitable for WFO and WFH working situations to prepare them for the industrial training program. The quantitative data method can be used to collect extensive data for further study to gain a deeper understanding of the problem.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Industrial training, Internships, Perceptions, Challenges

## 1. Introduction

Internships or industrial training have been widely accepted as a practice to produce high-quality graduates in the marketplace. It is a period of professional learning experience for students to work in a related field of study or interest that equips students with work experience and offers them the opportunity to gain valuable experience in a chosen field (Abidin et al., 2017). Many other benefits could be gained from the students or participants through this industrial training program, including the opportunity to apply their theoretical and practical knowledge in the real work environment and learn the new skills required in their specialization, such as using certain software to solve issues or problems (Tonot & Othman, 2021) on top of personal growth like good attitudes, better skills and maturity (Chiu et al., 2016). Most importantly, internship experience within a specific industry is often considered a crucial element for securing employment, as highlighted in the Job Outlook Report by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2018). This program offers invaluable practical experience and a platform for employers to guide and evaluate emerging talents.

Recognizing its crucial role in enhancing graduates' employability and providing real-world experience, researchers have increasingly focused on investigating students' perceptions of industrial training. A study conducted on students specializing in English for Professional Communication revealed that they perceived the internship program as not only useful but also essential in preparing them for the realities of the working world (Abidin et al., 2017). They also reiterated that the internship exposed them to human relations which they felt was necessary since it provided them with new knowledge and experience of what to expect in a real situation (Abidin et al., 2017). Another study, focusing on Engineering students, sought to explore their perceptions of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they possessed before and after participating in an internship program. The findings indicated that industrial training played a pivotal role in enhancing these three facets, showcasing its effectiveness in

contributing to the overall development of engineering students (Mat et al., 2011). Furthermore, the engineering students perceived that industrial training played a crucial role in reinforcing the characteristics associated with exemplary engineering students (Mat et al., 2011).

Additionally, employers and organizations have been the subject of the investigation to evaluate their perceptions and expectations concerning industrial trainees. A study conducted among students at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) revealed that, despite lacking work experience, students demonstrated satisfactory performance in overall practical skills, leadership qualities, and discipline (Chiu et al., 2016). Nevertheless, organizations expressed the need to strengthen students' basic knowledge and confidence in English language communication (Chiu et al., 2016). There was a persistent issue of a lack of confidence in English communication that necessitated structured activities or programs to address the concern. This aligns with a recurring concern among stakeholders or employers, indicating a perceived lack of essential skills among graduates for specific job roles. As highlighted by Abidin et al. (2017), employers look for positive qualities in graduates, including effective communication, motivation, a positive attitude, willingness to learn, and strong interpersonal skills. While, overall, organizations expressed satisfaction with the interns' performance, the study revealed a notable discrepancy between organizational expectations and the actual capabilities demonstrated by the interns.

While the significance of internships is undeniably critical for boosting graduates' employability and cultivating diverse skills, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the conventional approach to gaining real-world experience through industrial training. As formal teaching and learning activities have shifted to online distance learning (ODL), internship programs have adapted differently. Depending on the industry and company requirements, students may work from home, follow rotational shifts, or, in some cases, be required to work from the office, especially in essential services. Some international organizations also offer virtual internships, a type of internship that is conducted remotely allowing students to gain work experience from anywhere in the world as a way to adapt to this unprecedented situation (AlGhamdi, 2020). The adjustments made to internship programs, prompted by the restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, have impacted interns in various ways. This adaptation may influence both students' and employers' perceptions of internship programs. In light of the crucial roles played by industrial training and the potential changes in students' and employers' perspectives, the present study aims to investigate and discern students' perceptions regarding the skills required before participating in an internship program. Additionally, the study seeks to understand the challenges faced by students undergoing industrial training in the workplace, particularly amid the complexities imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### *1.1 Statement of Problem*

Students who were permitted to work remotely encountered various challenges such as a lack of practice in online resources and unmet basic needs. Similar to the issues faced in online teaching and learning, the absence of a suitable working environment and poor internet

connectivity became primary concerns for students working from home, as highlighted by Karim (2020). Some companies, expressing security concerns, did not allow students to work remotely. In certain instances, students had to manage confidential information and documents restricted within the companies, accessible only through an intranet network.

Changes in university policies and adjustments in industrial training practices have presented students with numerous challenges. Alongside common internship workplace issues such as excessive workloads, assignments unrelated to academic courses, and communication barriers, safety and proficiency in virtual communication have emerged as new concerns. Following the government's announcement of the Movement Control Order (MCO), students not permitted to work remotely faced a dilemma—choosing between completing the internship program or prioritizing their safety and health, as commuting to work and being physically present at the company posed potential risks.

Ahmad (2020) highlighted issues faced by students during pandemic situations. Working from home (WFH) imposed constraints on communication skills, leading to miscommunication and delayed responses from clients, supervisors, and colleagues, affecting the timely completion of tasks. Another study by Raišienė et al. (2020) emphasized that employees working from home during the pandemic were not favorable towards WFH due to the absence of face-to-face interaction with managers. While Raišienė et al.'s (2020) study focused on full-time employees, it did underscore challenges related to communication during the WFH period.

Recognizing the crucial role of internship programs in students' development and acknowledging the new challenges posed, this study aims to investigate students' perceptions of industrial training practices and the challenges faced by students during the COVID-19 pandemic in the workplace.

### *1.2 Research Objectives*

Two main objectives of this study are:

- a) To determine the students' perceptions of the skills required before joining an industrial training program.
- b) To identify the challenges industrial training students face at the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### *1.3 Research Questions*

Specifically, this study is done to answer the following questions;

1. What are the students' perceptions of the skills required before joining an industrial training program?
2. What challenges do industrial training students face at the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic?

## 1.4 Literature Review

### 1.4.1 Students' Perception of Skills Required Before Joining an Internship Program

Internships or industrial training programs offer students real-world experience and the opportunity to apply practical skills in their chosen fields. According to Bairwa and Kumari (2021), internships allow students to gain hands-on experience in the actual working environment and build connections in professional fields. Participating in an internship also significantly enhances the level of employability of students upon completing their studies. (Ramli, et al., 2013). Understanding the skills deemed essential by students before starting an internship is crucial in shaping effective educational outcomes. Hence, as students transition from an academic setting to the practical realm of internship, their perception of the necessary skills plays an important role in shaping their confidence and overall experience.

Monogaran and Subramaniam (2023) conducted a study on “*Skills Acquisition and Employability Among Arts and Social Sciences Interns in a Malaysian Public University*”. The study was done to investigate interns' employability skills from their perspective and determine the necessary skills sought by their employers. Using a skill gap analysis, it was identified that four (4) main skills that display the largest differences are ‘problem-solving and scientific skills’, ‘communication, leadership and team skills’, ‘practical skills’, and ‘managerial and entrepreneurial skills’. This leads to the conclusion that there is a notable gap in skill levels in these key areas, as perceived by the students and the employers.

Understanding the perspectives on employability skills is also essential in navigating the viewpoints of both students and employers. Lis á et al. (2019) in their study on “*Comparison between employers' and students' expectations in respect of employability skills of university graduates*” highlighted that student perceived only three (3) skills to be particularly crucial namely ‘experience in the field’, ‘leadership’ and ‘field knowledge’. These findings emphasize the priorities students place on certain skills in the context of employability though may not perfectly align with the expectations of employers, as suggested by the authors.

This current study seeks to acquire students' perception of the skills required before joining an internship program, as previous studies have mainly focused on employers' perceptions and expectations (Monogaran & Subramaniam,2023; Azmi & Hashim,2020) or students' general perceptions towards internship (Bairwa & Kumari, 2021; Yang, 2016).

### 1.4.2 Challenges Faced by Industrial Training Students at the Workplace During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly reshaped the landscape of industrial training, introducing many challenges for students navigating their professional experience. This situation arose in part due to the implementation of movement restrictions in many countries, including Malaysia, as a strategy to control COVID-19 cases. Furthermore, Higher learning institutions (HEIs) have adapted their teaching and learning methods to align with the current situation, substituting face-to-face classes with online delivery. A similar adaptation has been observed in companies during this period, with some opting for a rotational work basis and

others adopting a work-from-home model. Notably, companies conducted their recruitment and internships virtually during the pandemic (Kimble-Hill, et al., 2020). Consequently, the series of Movement Control Orders (MCO) imposed in Malaysia presented its own set of challenges for students undergoing internships during this period.

The challenges of undertaking an internship during COVID-19 began with finding suitable organizations that aligned with their program. As evidenced by the recent report, internships were significantly impacted by COVID-19, with fewer available placements and changes to internship responsibilities (Teng, et al., 2022). The same study revealed that interns were supposed to go on public health internships and initially secured internship placement at government agencies and regional health clusters had to be canceled due to the high-risk status of healthcare institutions. Additionally, overseas internships were put on hold because of restrictions on travel. This corroborates the findings of Dani et al., (2020), where internships for hospitality students were either canceled or the duration was reduced due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of these limitations, students from various backgrounds were affected, either in finding internship placement or being unable to practice the skills they had learned.

In another study, Varghese and Francis (2020) revealed that even though students have become more skilled in using technology due to e-internships, they perceive an absence of team camaraderie in the workplace. Besides, they highlighted that maintaining a work-life balance during e-internship was challenging for interns. Working remotely is also challenging for some students as they spend their working hours without the physical presence of colleagues, leading to a perceived deficiency in the online internship experience. The inability to experience a real workplace environment is noted as one of the negative aspects (AlGhamdi, 2022). For certain students, this encompasses the absence of direct and live interaction with their supervisors and colleagues during the internship. In the same study, the students reported the training was provided in the form of pre-prepared video materials which contributes to the sense of rigidity regarding workplace interaction. Subsequently, the lack of real-time communication resulted in missed opportunities for them to practice and enhance their communication skills in the workplace.

The past studies on challenges faced by industrial training students were mostly conducted quantitatively (see for example Lis á et al., 2019; Dani et al., 2020; Varghese & Francis, 2020). Therefore, it could not ascertain the students' views in-depth, including the aspects where remote industrial training could be further improved. The present study seeks to address this gap by delving into students' perspectives in depth, aiming to gain a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

## **2. Method**

This section explains and describes in detail how the study was conducted including the research design, sampling procedure, participant characteristics, research instrument and data analysis procedure. This will give insight into the appropriateness of the methods used and the reliability and validity of the findings.

### *2.1 Research Design*

A qualitative research method was employed in this study to collect data on the students' perceptions of skills required before an industrial training program and the challenges they faced at the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic. Dawadi, Shrestha and Giri (2021) suggested that a qualitative research method could provide in-depth data for a study which could also help the researchers in obtaining the findings of the study. The study focused on the final-year students from one of the public Malaysian universities, who had completed an industrial training program. A total of five students who had completed their industrial training program during the COVID-19 pandemic from various organizations were interviewed. The responses from the participants allow the researchers to determine the students' perceptions of the skills required before stepping into an organization for the industrial training program and the challenges they faced during the hard time back in 2020 - 2021. Before the interview sessions, a consent form via Google Form was given to the participants to ensure they agreed to be part of the study. The interview sessions were conducted online between 20 to 30 minutes by the researchers via; Zoom and Google Meet, and were video-recorded. Therefore, collecting the data by interviewing the participants to achieve the purpose of this study would be relevant and appropriate.

### *2.2 Sampling Procedures*

The purposive sampling technique was utilized in this study to collect the data to examine the students' perception of skills required before the industrial training program and the challenges they faced at the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic. This method was used because the researchers have set the criteria for choosing the participants of the study to meet its purpose, (Nikolopoulou, 2022). Choosing the students who had the experience doing the industrial training program during the COVID-19 pandemic, between the years 2020 to 2021 was one of the criteria. Also, these students were the final-year students at a local university that the researchers had chosen.

### *2.3 Participant Characteristics*

The participants of this study were purposely chosen from the list of students having an industrial training program during the COVID-19 pandemic (Year 2020 - Year 2021) in a public Malaysian university. The participants had full autonomy to withdraw the statements before the analysis was done if they found any contradiction from what they had said. They were also guaranteed that the statements they made would not affect them academically or non-academically, professionally or non-professionally.

### *2.4 Research Instrument*

A semi-structured interview was chosen as the method of data collection for this study because it allows the participants to be more flexible in giving the responses naturally based on the set of questions prepared by the researchers (George, 2023). This will give room for the participants to choose how they want to respond to the questions asked; either to give short and precise answers or with long explanations. Hence, this method was relevant to be utilized in this study to investigate the issues which are the students' perceptions of skills

required before an industrial training program and the challenges the students faced at the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 2.5 Data Analysis Procedure

After the data collection procedure, the interviews' video recordings were transcribed. The transcription of the video recordings was done by a professional transcriber to assist the researchers with the analysis. The transcriptions were then translated into English as some of the participants used the Malay language during the interview sessions. Next, the researchers analyzed the data using the thematic analysis technique. There were six steps of the data analysis technique which are 1) Familiarizing yourself with your data, 2) Generating initial codes, 3) Searching for themes, 4) Reviewing themes, 5) Defining and naming themes, and 6) Producing report (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 16-23). These were suggested in using thematic analysis and the researchers followed these steps in completing this study.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the data analysis of the findings based on the two research questions.

### 3.1 RQ1: What Are the Students' Perceptions of Skills Required Before Industrial Training?

Understanding the students' perceptions of skills required for industrial training is crucial as they are considered to be the key to the success of internship programs (Yang, 2016). This will allow institutions to align their curriculum with the student's needs. From the interview data, there were five main skills perceived as important by the students namely (1) communication skills, (2) ICT skills, (3) proactive skills, (4) knowledge management skills, and (5) leadership skills.

#### 3.1.1 Communication Skills

The first skill that the students consider crucial for industrial training is communication skills. Previous research has identified communication skills to encompass verbal communication, giving and receiving feedback, public speaking and participation in meetings (Jackson, 2013). S3 stated *"that interpersonal and that soft skill to be able to communicate so it doesn't hinder these students from actually working in real life, later in the work field. So, I believe other than communication skills, everything else should be alright with how our course is doing."* Hence, a strong foundation of communication proficiency will be beneficial as employers particularly look for this quality in the hiring process (Monogaran & Subramaniam, 2023)

Other than for the purposes mentioned above, the students also believe that communication skills are significant for interacting with their co-workers. As expressed by S3 *"The reason is, during my internship, they mentioned that there are students who are kind of like... just quiet. Meaning, it's like they don't participate with their colleagues at the workplace."* Having poor communication skills not only impacts their interactions with colleagues but also hinders the student's productivity at work. These results align with Azmi and Hashim (2020) in their study who highlighted that communication skill was mainly the most important skill needed by students in internships.

### 3.1.2 ICT Skills

Another skill deemed important for an internship according to the students is ICT (Information and Communication Technology) skills. As the workplace environment shifts to a digital landscape, possessing competent ICT skills becomes increasingly crucial. According to S2, *“Actually, in university, we all talk about presentation, documentation and [\*\*] but I think, there should be a course or a short term for Excel classes because to be honest, Excel we use not only to enter manual... enter data but lots of tools we use in Excel. There’s like formula, not only the simple formula but also... how to say that... difficult formula, the data. Everything is using the Excel. Sometimes, I need to search how to use the Excel for this.”* This realization reinforces the belief that a strong foundation in using technology is essential before the students embark on their internship journey.

A similar perception was also shared by another student saying that the skill of utilizing technology is vital in preparing them for an internship. S3 revealed that handling digital tools and platforms for various tasks is particularly important alongside the other skills needed in a workplace. S3 mentioned that *“But, in class we do get enough exposure to all the presentings, and doing tasks online because we had 2 years to prepare for that, and we did learn to use thankfully, all the Microsoft platforms, using Google Meets, and Canva, and all other platforms that was needed during that time in COVID. So, now that we are working, so we’re kind of familiar with all of those platforms online. And now, using the platforms as [...] to this day.”* The result confirmed the result of a study by Monogaran and Subramaniam (2023) that finds ICT skills as one of the important skills for an internship as perceived by the students.

### 3.1.3 Proactive Skills

Proactive skills are the next skill that the students think is crucial before joining an internship program. Embracing a proactive attitude means actively seeking opportunities to improve and achieve positive outcomes. According to S1 *“If we are given a task, it means when given that particular task, that’s the only thing they focus on. In my opinion, students should be... not aggressive, more like actively engaged, if they don’t have a specific task, they should still involve themselves with others. They can do this by asking ‘How can I help?’ or ‘What can I do?’”* Taking the initiative to be proactive shows that the students are actively engaged in the existing workplace environment which proves to be a skill that is preferred by employers, as supported by Azmi and Hashim (2020) in their study.

The same perception was expressed by S5 when he mentioned *“You have to be really proactive”,* S5 further mentioned *“Certainly, because my internship placement involves three of us. The other two individuals are not familiar with the production. So, when they are not familiar, they tend to speak less and ask fewer questions, while I am someone who, although not highly experienced, is accustomed to production work. I am comfortable noticing what is lacking and what is unnecessary. However, other students who are not accustomed to production just remain silent. They simply wait for instructions.”* Possessing proactive skills gives students the ability to anticipate challenges and empowers them to be more resilient in their workplace surroundings.

### 3.1.4 Knowledge Management Skills

From the interview session, another skill perceived as essential by the students is knowledge management skills. Monoharan and Subramaniam (2023) define this skill as the ability not only to have the necessary knowledge but also to apply it when required. Students have to be prepared for the possibility of being sent to any organization or department demanding the practical application of the knowledge acquired during their studies. *S4* admitted “*OK, it goes back to where you go for the internship. Kalau macam where I went is Nestle. I went to Nestle is a food industry. If let’s say they dropped me off dekat ice-cream department or they drop me to any food department, OK, to handle food, obviously I am not well-equipped cause I am more into language.*” By expressing this, it is clear that the student believes that knowledge management skills are crucial in preparing them for the workplace environment. This also confirms the findings by Lis á et al. (2019) which revealed that having field knowledge skills will enable the students to stay relevant in the competitive job market.

### 3.1.5 Leadership Skills

One of the soft skills suggested by the Malaysian Qualification Framework (MQF) initiated by the Ministry of Higher Education is leadership skills. Based on the data from the interview, students have listed leadership skills as one of the important skills needed before starting industrial training. In the same vein, understanding and refining leadership skills is believed to be vital in cultivating personal growth and professional development among interns. From the interview, *S1* stated that “*...before going for the internship, it would be better if the university organizes a session, perhaps at the end of semester 5, to guide what they need to do during the internship.*” which emphasizes the leadership skills deemed necessary for an internship, similar to the findings of the study conducted by Lis á et al. (2019). Moreover, recognising the importance of this particular skill highlights the initiative approach students take in preparing them for real work demands.

## 3.2 RQ2: What Challenges Do Industrial Training Students Face at the Workplace During the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Seven themes emerged from the data gathered during the interview sessions related to the challenges the students face doing internships during the COVID-19 pandemic: (1) real working experience, (2) communication, (3) mismatch skills and difficulty in finding internship placement, (4) distractions, (5) difficulties in handling assigned task, (6) inappropriate working hours and (7) physical discomfort.

### 3.2.1 Real Working Experience

From the interview, the students revealed they missed the face-to-face working environment (*S1: Personally, I’m okay working WFH, but it is just that as students we want to feel the real working environment*). The student also shared doing an internship during the pandemic resulted in limited opportunities to get other experiences working at the office (*S1: In my opinion, for students who did practicals during this pandemic...yes it...like limited time right? They don’t get to explore many things*). AlGhamdi (2020) and Teng, et al. (2022) highlighted a similar issue, where one of the negative aspects of doing an internship during the pandemic

is a lack of exposure to the real workplace environment. In addition, student 3 shared the lack of working at the office experience, receiving instructions through video recording and voicemail was disappointing as she wished to learn more during the internship, and having to work at home limited the experience (*S3: I only usually get voicemails, or just...video recording about what and how I should do my work...so, the lack of in-person, or just on-site experience was kind of...a little bit...underwhelming for me because I wish I did learn a little bit more*).

Besides, the lack of informal communication or small talk between colleagues was limited when WFH (*S3: I would say, just a little bit because I don't think our age gap is that big. So, I do feel like I could talk but, since everyone is very occupied and on tasks, so I didn't reach out too well*). This corroborates the study by Varghese and Francis (2020) where students felt the absence of physical presence of colleagues is one of the challenges noted by them. Even though some students were affected by the lack of WFO experience, one student shared his neutral stand on WFO and WFH as he worked on a rotational basis during the pandemic (*S4: I feel a bit neutral, I'd say because I was excited to go working at the office as well on days I had to go to the office. It feels like going to work. On days I do work from home it is just like you wake up at 9, and then turn on the laptop, then do the work. Stuff like that. It doesn't really feel demotivated*).

### 3.2.2 Communication

Communication-related issues were the second challenge students faced during the COVID-19 pandemic which derived from the lack of face-to-face communication, difficulties when communicating with those from different organizations and delayed feedback. The absence of face-to-face communication impeded the student, especially when receiving guidance from their supervisor. The medium of communication with the supervisor was limited to virtual communication (*S3: I think I would just say that in terms of communication. It's limited to only virtual. Communication, since I can't talk to them in person. So, all of the communication was done in WhatsApp, or just Google Meet, or just voice notes. I think that is just the biggest setback, I have to say so, in terms of communication*). The student also deemed that having face-to-face interaction is more meaningful for students during the internship program. (*S3: I didn't feel much of... how do I say this, like the in-person experience of receiving the guidance because I only usually get voicemails, or just... video recordings about what and how I should do my work. So, I wouldn't say it was too detailed. So, the lack of in-person, or just like on-site experience was kind of... a little bit... underwhelming for me because I wish I did learn a little bit more. Yeah, that was the biggest setback for me personally*). Similarly, AlGhamdi (2022) emphasized that receiving training in pre-prepared video materials contributes to the sense of rigidity in workplace interaction.

Despite the face-to-face communication inadequacy, they noted that it is relatively easy to reach their supervisors (*S1: I'll WhatsApp if there's anything. It was considered easy to communicate with my supervisor at that time*), (*S3: But, it wasn't that hard to reach them, but it was hard for me because I have to just deal with all of that. The information alone. I didn't have that in-person experience I would personally like to have*). From the interview, even

though the students admitted it was easy to get in touch with their supervisors, they emphasized that having to deal with the information through virtual communication is daunting. The lack of face-to-face communication among colleagues was also one of the challenges faced by the students. This is in accordance with a study done by AlGhamdi (2022) where they revealed that limited direct and live interaction with supervisors and colleagues is considered one of the drawbacks of WFH. For students who need to deal with a project, the importance of face-to-face communication is high especially when they work in a theater production company where meetings are always done physically. As Ting, et al. (2017) highlighted, the type of work that involves teamwork and communication between parties is necessary for project completion. Hence, the student valued the necessity of sitting together to discuss and solve the issues that arose (*S5: Our course is more to physical cooperation...where we need to gather, discuss, exchange idea for the performance. However, online meetings make it harder to gather and discuss*).

Dealing with people outside of the organization sets another challenge in the communication aspect. This included the difficulty of contacting them as the call often did not get through (*S2: I tried to call the Person-In-Charge but it couldn't go through at all because there's a lot of calling that goes through to that person. So, it's quite difficult at that time, and then my supervisor just takes charge to contact them before they contact me back*). Besides, dealing with inquiries from others who were not from the organization was demanding for the student when the caller was being discourteous (*S2: My Supervisor give me a job which is I need to handle a recruitment, and the inquiries from the candidates sometimes they are kind of like... when they call, they kind of like being a little bit like a "Karen." So, it was kind of hard, and sometimes when I couldn't handle it, my senior will take over lah*). In both instances, it can be seen that the students receive a form of support from the supervisors. Teng, et al. (2022) highlighted supportive supervisors contributing to the pleasant internship experience.

The final aspect of communication-related issues faced by the students was delayed feedback. Several students admitted that they often received delayed feedback from their supervisors, but they considered this to be understandable in the remote internship (*S3: I do get the late response sometimes from my supervisor if I needed immediate guidance. It won't be too immediate. I would get in a span of 30, or an hour sometimes, delayed time. But I do understand*), (*S4: That one, there are times where my Supervisor is busy, so I WhatsApp her or call her, she cannot reply. So, [\*\*] lah. That one to me is quite normal*). Teng, et al. (2022) investigated the supervisors' perspective concerning communication occurring in the WFH setting and revealed that supervisors also conceded providing closer guidance was challenging due to the WFH situation.

### 3.2.3 Mismatch Skills and Difficulty in Finding Internship Placement

Another challenge the students experienced was finding internship placement. During the pandemic, not many companies accepted internships from students (*S2: Actually, it doesn't relate to my field of study, but I took one subject in HR for one semester. It is quite hard to find a workplace that really relates to public relation (PR)*). This was true as some companies opted to cancel their internship program during the pandemic (Kimble-Hill, 2023). In most

cases, even if they were able to secure an internship placement, there was a mismatch between the work they were expected to do and the university courses they took (*S1: I personally sent the document for internship, but they rejected my application. During that time, COVID-19 cases were still high. So, most companies did not accept internship students*). This finding is in line with a study conducted by Teng, et al. (2022) where they reported COVID-19 situation considerably impacted internships and led to changes to the internship's scope.

### 3.2.4 Distractions

Virtual internship poses distraction challenges because WFH affects students in various ways. Most students who go for internships are also working on their final year project (FYP) paper. Juggling work during WFH was challenging for these students (*S3: I would to say it was a bit challenging because I had to juggle with internship work and also, doing my FYP*). Another student shared that the distractions at home were a bit difficult for him to cope with (*S4: ...it is a bit challenging because I do have to stay at home. I have to be doing work at the comfort of my own home. So, that would be including all of the distractions*). The finding concurs with Varghese and Francis (2020) whereby interns admitted that maintaining work-life balance was challenging during virtual internship. Besides that, the student shared that having to cope with many tasks at once made him accidentally overlook other projects (*S4: It is just that sometimes there are too many things to handle, there's too many things to do that I would forget one of the smaller projects*).

### 3.2.5 Difficulties in Handling the Assigned Task

Due to the nature of the students' scope of work, completing certain projects could be difficult during the pandemic. For instance, for the student who did his internship at the theater production, a stage theater performance was replaced with a virtual performance. Hence, he felt it was very challenging to plan performance virtually (*S5: to direct virtually is challenging in terms of observing each actor's facial reaction and movement. It is hard to plan online theatre performances*). Another student shared the difficulty she faced in handling data entry manually (*S2: the challenge is I have to key in a whole lot of data about all candidates manually through Excel*). Doing repetitive work can be a daunting experience coupled with the WFH condition. Perhaps the lack of support and interaction among colleagues which can make the task bearable makes the task even more difficult to handle mentally and emotionally as emphasized by Varghese and Francis (2020).

### 3.2.6 Inappropriate Working Hours

Another challenge students face in internships during the COVID-19 was the inappropriate working hours (*S3: I would say we had flexible working hours because from morning until sometimes at night, not too late... but sometimes at night, I have to be on standby to receive any emergency meetings, or emergency updates*). The flexible working hours of WFH might not be the best because they had to work outside the office hours. The student shared the uncomfortable feeling of having to be constantly on standby (*S4: Yes, they will disturb. That one I forgot. That one I forgot to mention, sometimes I was about ready to go to bed, suddenly*

boss called or typed said “Tomorrow, do this...do this...do this. Tomorrow, you need to complete this...this...”)

### 3.2.7 Physical Discomfort

The last challenge addressed by the students was physical discomfort. They needed to work at a time when the cases of COVID-19 were on the rise. For those who worked on a rotational basis, on days they needed to WFO, they were required to follow the standard work procedure such as wearing a face mask (*S2: from 9 to 5 I have to wear a mask, so, it is a bit stuffy for me. It is quite hard to complete my work*). Wearing the mask for eight hours caused discomfort for the students who had to work at the office.

## 4. Conclusion

The main aim of this study is to identify the students’ perceptions of the skills required before joining an industrial training program and to identify the challenges industrial training students face at the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings from this research indicate that there were five skills perceived as important by the students namely communication skills, ICT skills, proactive skills, knowledge management skills, and leadership skills. By portraying their knowledge and demonstrating a well-rounded skill set, students prepare themselves to cope with the challenges of the evolving modern professional landscape.

Completing the industrial training program during the COVID-19 pandemic also revealed several challenges. Some students expressed regret about missing the opportunity to complete their internship at the office because they would have been able to learn directly from their supervisors and colleagues. Another significant finding that emerges from this study is the communication issues faced by the students. Engaging in virtual communication, either synchronous or asynchronous, was insufficient for the students, especially when receiving tasks and guidance from their supervisors. Nonetheless, they pointed out that they receive great support from their supervisors whenever they encounter problems when dealing with people from another organization. In general, it seems that they coped reasonably well with asynchronous virtual communication, but somehow, they still felt that having immediate feedback would be even better.

The findings of this study suggest that it is important for universities to include special activities or programs to equip students with relevant skills that fit both the WFO and WFH working environments. This program can assist them in managing their expectations and enhance their knowledge of diverse workplace situations so that they are resilient and able to overcome challenges. Besides, companies can assist the students by planning a better internship program for them so that they can apply and sharpen their skills during the internship. Close cooperation between the university and companies is believed to yield a positive result.

This study is not without limitations. Its limitation is mainly based on the findings of this study being limited to this group of participants because researchers utilized the purposive sampling method. This study also only employed qualitative data collection. Therefore, the

results from this study cannot be generalized to other populations. For future research, the quantitative data method can be used to gather extensive data to better understand the issue. Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted the working environment at the workplace. To date, some companies are still practicing flexible working days, and it has become the norm. Therefore, future studies on the topic can also be done to ascertain the supervisors' views on remote internships.

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