Implementing High Quality Internships as Part of Practically-Oriented, Application-Based Degree Programs in Ethiopian Universities of Applied Sciences

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Executive Summary

Following comprehensive pilot projects implemented in Jigjiga University and Kotebe University of Education, critical gaps and opportunities have been identified in the design and implementation of high-quality internships within Ethiopia's Universities of Applied Sciences (UASs). The project outputs highlight the need to include practically-oriented, application-based internships as an integral part of tertiary education programs, particularly to bridge the theory-practice divide and enhance graduates' career readiness. The pilots demonstrated the transformative potential of strong university-industry (university-school) partnerships. When internships are well-structured, aligned with academic goals, and supported through dedicated mentorship, students show enhanced professional engagement and deeper learning. The universities developed new tools such as mentorship checklists, evaluation templates, and structured hosting agreements that offer valuable models for broader replication. However, significant implementation challenges were also reported. These include shortage of internship periods, limited financial and logistical support, insufficient baseline data collection, weak follow-up mechanisms, and difficulties in aligning curriculum with industry needs. Moreover, the absence of incentives for faculty and the limited availability of suitable industry placements remain critical bottlenecks. Based on the findings, this policy brief recommends systemic reform to strengthen the quality and relevance of internship programs in Ethiopian UASs. Key recommendations include: establishing structured and funded university-industry linkage offices; integrating internship preparation into curricula; offering incentives for academic mentors; co-developing programs with industry partners; and adopting national guidelines and toolkits informed by the pilot experiences. Strengthening the practical learning environment will be vital to producing skilled, employable graduates and building a responsive higher education system aligned with Ethiopia's development goals.

1. Introduction

Internships play a critical role in equipping students with employability skills across multiple dimensions (Silva et al., 2016; Ansari, 2025). This provides students with the opportunity to evaluate their abilities, beliefs and attitudes in relation to specific tasks or career pathways (Howery, 1983). Internship also plays a pivotal role to ensure a smooth transition from student life to the work place environment (Kapareliotis et al., 2019).

In countries like Ethiopia; where financial constraints are pervasive and graduate unemployment rates remain high; internships provide essential work-based learning opportunities (Ogden et al., 2024; Jongsermtrakoon et al., 2025). Universities of Applied Sciences in the Country are thus

expected to deliver high-quality internships that enable students to gain practical experience, develop professional competencies, and improve their job prospects. Despite its importance, internship program faces systemic challenges such as limited industry capacity, inadequate monitoring mechanisms, and financial barriers (Gashaw, 2019). This policy brief presents opportunities and challenges encountered during the implementation of high quality internship programs at Kotebe University of Education and Jigjiga University through the FAITH project, and proposes actionable policy recommendations.

2. Policy Problems

This policy brief is developed in alignment with the pilot project implemented on High-Quality Internships as Part of Practically-Oriented, Application-Based Degree Programs" in two selected Ethiopian UASs (Jigjiga University and Kotebe University of Education). The key issue that hinders the implementation of internship in Ethiopian UASs is the limited industry partnerships, as few companies are willing or adequately equipped to host interns. Additionally, inadequate supervision; due to a lack of qualified industry mentors and infrequent follow-ups from universities further hampers the effectiveness of internships. Many internship opportunities also fail to align with students' academic goals or skills set, reducing their relevance and impact. Financial and logistic related constraints exacerbate the problem, as insufficient stipends force students to seek local but irrelevant placements rather than pursuing career-aligned opportunities. These systemic gaps weaken the ability of internships to prepare students for the workforce, contributing to persistent unemployment and skills mismatches in the labor market. Addressing these challenges is critical to enhance the employability of graduates and ensuring that education translates into meaningful economic participation.

3. Opportunities for Implementing High Quality Internship
The following opportunities were identified during the implementation of internships by the project FAITH.

Table 1: Opportunities for implementing high quality internship

Bridging the skills gap	Internships provide students with the chance to develop practical skills that balance their academic knowledge, helping to link between education and the workforce.

Strengthening university-industry collaboration	Enhancing internships can foster stronger relationships between universities and industries, ensuring that curricula align with industry needs and increasing collaboration for future workforce demands.
Policy-driven improvement	With the introduction of targeted policies, internships can become more structured, standardized, and effectively supported, addressing current gaps in funding, supervision, and implementation frameworks.
Empowerment	Internships can play a pivotal role in empowering young people by offering them exposure to the professional world, enhancing their confidence and career readiness.
Economic growth	A skilled workforce attracts investment and supports Ethiopia's industrialization goals.

4. Challenges

The following are key challenges identified during the implementation of internship by the project FAITH:

Table 2: Challenges that hinder the implementation of high-quality internship

Challenges	Descriptions
Institutional barriers	Weak industry linkage offices and unclear roles for universities and companies hinder effective collaboration.
Financial resource constraints	Lack of funding for student stipends, transportation, and supervisor training undermines internship quality and accessibility.
Cultural gaps	Many industries perceive interns as burdens rather than contributors, affecting willingness to engage and mentor.
Absence of clear internship models	There is no standardized or well-communicated internship model that guides implementation and expectations.
Industrial personnel skills	Industry supervisors often lack training or clarity on their roles and responsibilities in guiding student interns.
Mismatch between curriculum and industry needs	Curricula are not regularly updated to reflect industry trends, leading to skill gaps and reduced internship relevance.
Monitoring and evaluation gaps	There are no consistent systems to track student performance or assess the effectiveness of internship programs.
Limited career services and support	UASs typically lack structured career offices or placement support systems, making it difficult for students to access and benefit from internships.

5. Key Policy Recommendations

Recognizing the potential opportunities and challenges identified during the implementation of the pilot project, the following key policy recommendations are forwarded:

Table 3: policy recommendations to implement high quality internship

Policy Option	Key Action	Pros	Cons	Stakeholders
Strengthen University –Industry Collaboration	Formalized structured partnership platforms, incentivize applied research and training, strengthen accountability, strengthen university-industry linkage offices.	Enhances partnership development, monitoring, and accountability.	Requires budget for staffing and operations.	Ministry of Education, Universities, Private Sector
Integrating internship preparation into curricula	Align curriculum with industry needs, develop structured internship support programs, adopt suitable internship models, institutionalize policies for internship quality assurance	Enhance skill development, stronger industry-academia collaboration, structured learning experience, higher student engagement	Logistical and administrative challenges, financial and resource constraints, limited flexibility for students,	MoE, Universities, Industries
Co-developing programs with industry partners	Establish structured industry-advisory committees, Integrate work-based learning into curriculum, facilitate faculty and industry staff exchange,	More practical, job focused, higher graduate placement, funding, access to network and jobs	Less theoretical depth, over specialization, commercial influence on education, favor elite institutions	MoE, Universities, Industries, Community, development partners
Standardize supervision training	Develop national/institutional supervision framework, provide trainings to the suppervisors, establish continuous support	Improves mentorship quality; aligns expectations.	Financial resources and time investment.	Universities, Industries, Development

Policy Option	Key Action	Pros	Cons	Stakeholders
	systems			Partners
Increase funding & stipends	Institutionalize funding mechanism, incentivize industry participants, link stipends to performance metrics	Enables students to accept placements far from home; reduces dropout.	Fiscal constraints; need for sustainable funding mechanisms.	MoE, MoF Universities Private Sector, Donors
Develop digital monitoring tools	Build a digital platform, integrate AI-driven analytics and ensure stakeholder adoption and training	Tracks student progress, ensures feedback loops.	Requires tech, infrastructure and training.	Universities, IT Firms
Promote sector-specific internships	Map high-growth sectors and skills demand, create sectoral internship hubs and offer sector-linked incentives	Aligns placements with regional industry needs.	Limited companies in niche sectors.	Regional Governments, Chambers of Commerce

6. Conclusion

Ethiopia's internship programs hold immense potential to transform the education and employment outcomes of the Universities of Applied Sciences. By implementing these recommendations; strengthening institutional frameworks, investing in partnerships, and adopting flexible models, UASs can create a robust internship ecosystem. Policymakers, universities, and industries must collaborate urgently to address funding, supervision, and equity gaps, ensuring internships become a cornerstone of Ethiopia's skilled workforce development.

7. References

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