



Internship or Exploitation? Reassessing the Ethics of Unpaid Work Experience

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Abstract

Unpaid internships have become a common aspect of the professional and educational environment in India, offering students opportunities to gain practical exposure and industry experience. However, the lack of a specific legal framework governing internships has created uncertainty regarding the rights, duties, and protection of interns. This research examines whether unpaid internships in India amount to legal exploitation or remain valid forms of experiential learning. The study is based on a questionnaire survey conducted among students, recent graduates, and employers to understand their views on fairness, educational value, and awareness of legal rights. The findings show that while most internships are educational in nature and do not involve direct labour, the absence of proper legal recognition and regulation often leads to inconsistent practices. The research concludes that there is a strong need for a clear legal framework to define the status of interns and ensure fair and transparent internship practices in India.

Keywords: Unpaid internships, legal exploitation, labour law, employment regulation, experiential learning, India.

1. Introduction

- i). **Background of the Study:** Internships serve as a bridge between academic learning and professional work, providing students and recent graduates with practical exposure and industry experience ^[1]. In India, internships have become a common feature across multiple sectors, including corporate, legal, technical, and creative fields. While internships are designed to facilitate experiential learning, the prevalence of unpaid internships raises important legal and ethical questions ^[2]. Interns are not formally recognized as employees under Indian labour laws, leaving their rights and protections ambiguous. The lack of a structured legal framework can lead to inconsistent practices and potential exploitation, even when the primary goal is educational.
- ii). **Rationale of the Study:** The study is conducted to investigate the legal and ethical dimensions of unpaid internships in India. Although internships are intended to provide practical learning experiences, the absence of clear legal recognition creates uncertainty about interns' rights and responsibilities. This research aims to examine whether unpaid internships can be considered legitimate educational practices or if they carry risks of legal exploitation ^[3]. By analyzing perceptions from students, recent graduates, and employers, the study seeks to fill

the gap in understanding about awareness of legal protections and fair practices in internships.

- iii). **Scope and Significance of the Research:** The research focuses on unpaid internships across different sectors in India, with a target population of students and recent graduates. It examines the legal, ethical, and educational aspects of internships, highlighting awareness of rights, organizational practices, and challenges faced by interns. The study is significant as it provides empirical insights into the internship ecosystem, identifies gaps in legal protection, and offers recommendations for policymakers, educational institutions, and organizations to ensure fair, transparent, and educational internship programs ^[4].

iv). Research Questions

- i). How do students and recent graduates perceive unpaid internships in India?
- ii). Do unpaid internships in India have the potential for legal or ethical exploitation?
- iii). How aware are interns and employers about the legal framework (or lack thereof) governing internships?
- iv). What challenges do interns face during unpaid internship programs across various sectors?
- v). What measures can be recommended to ensure fair,

educational, and transparent internship practices?

2. Review of Literature

i). Conceptual Framework of Unpaid Internships:

Internships serve as a bridge between academic knowledge and practical workplace skills^[5]. Within this framework, unpaid internships are designed primarily as learning experiences, where students or recent graduates gain exposure, mentorship, and professional development without receiving monetary compensation. The concept emphasizes skill acquisition, networking, and experiential learning. However, the absence of standardized structures, role clarity, or legal recognition introduces potential ethical and practical concerns. The conceptual framework for this research focuses on evaluating how unpaid internships balance educational benefits with ethical obligations and legal safeguards.

ii). **Legal and Ethical Perspectives:** Legally, India currently lacks a dedicated statute regulating internships. Interns are typically considered trainees rather than employees, meaning that labour protections, such as the Minimum Wages Act or social security benefits, do not apply. The All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) issued internship guidelines in 2016 to formalize learning objectives and training structures, but these do not require remuneration^[6]. From an ethical standpoint, scholars argue that unpaid internships can exacerbate inequality, as students from economically weaker backgrounds may be unable to participate, limiting access to opportunities. Legal researchers suggest that without statutory clarity, interns remain vulnerable to inconsistent practices, even if the primary intent of the internship is educational^[7].

iii). **Educational and Professional Value:** Research indicates that internships, including unpaid ones, can significantly enhance learning outcomes. Patil and Shinde (2018) highlight that hands-on experience, workplace exposure, and mentorship are crucial for skill development and employability^[8]. Rao (2021) further observes that interns often prioritize learning and networking opportunities over compensation^[9]. Despite these benefits, the absence of formal legal or institutional safeguards can compromise transparency, accountability, and equitable access, creating potential gaps in the intended educational experience.

iv). **Empirical Evidence on Unpaid Internships:** Empirical studies suggest that unpaid internships occupy a complex space between educational training and potential exploitation. Singh and Mehta (2019) note that while students gain skills, unpaid internships disproportionately favor those who can afford to work without pay, reinforcing socioeconomic disparities. Kumar (2020) finds that organizational practices vary widely, with some internships providing structured learning, while others expect interns to perform substantial tasks without formal recognition. Collectively, these studies highlight limited awareness among interns regarding their rights and the ethical implications of unpaid internships, underscoring the need for research that incorporates both intern and employer perspectives.

v). Research Gaps

Although prior literature discusses the benefits and challenges of unpaid internships, several gaps remain:

i). Limited primary data capturing students' and graduates' perceptions across diverse sectors in India.

- ii). Insufficient exploration of interns' awareness of legal rights and protections.
- iii). Lack of empirical linkage between learning outcomes and potential ethical or legal vulnerabilities.
- iv). Minimal analysis of employer perspectives and organizational practices in shaping internship experiences.

This study aims to fill these gaps by using a structured questionnaire to assess perceptions of fairness, educational value, and legal awareness among interns, while also considering organizational practices, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of unpaid internships in India.

3. Research Methodology

i). Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this study are:

- a) To examine the perceptions of students and recent graduates regarding unpaid internships in India.
- b) To assess whether unpaid internships may involve legal or ethical exploitation.
- c) To evaluate the awareness of interns and employers about the legal framework governing internships.
- d) To identify common challenges faced by interns during unpaid internship programs.
- e) To suggest measures for ensuring fair, educational, and transparent internship practices.

ii). Statement of the Problem

Unpaid internships have become widespread in India, yet there is no comprehensive legal framework regulating them. Interns are often considered trainees rather than employees, leaving their rights and protections ambiguous. This legal and ethical ambiguity raises concerns about fairness, access, and potential exploitation. Despite the growing prevalence of internships, there is limited empirical research on interns' perceptions, experiences, and awareness of their legal rights. This study addresses this problem by systematically collecting and analyzing data to understand the current internship landscape and its implications for ethical and legal practices.

iii). Research Hypotheses

- a) **H1:** Students perceive unpaid internships primarily as learning opportunities rather than forms of exploitation.
- b) **H2:** Awareness of legal rights among interns is low.
- c) **H3:** Organizational practices vary significantly in providing learning opportunities and ethical treatment during internships.
- d) **H4:** There is a positive correlation between structured internship programs and perceived educational value.

iv). **Research Design:** The study follows a descriptive research design, aimed at systematically collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data to describe the perceptions, awareness, and experiences of interns regarding unpaid internships. This design allows for a detailed examination of the phenomenon and provides insights into the legal, ethical, and educational aspects of internships.

v). **Population and Sample Selection:** The population for this study includes students and recent graduates in India who have undertaken unpaid internships in various sectors, including corporate, legal, technical, and creative fields. The sample consists of 139 respondents, selected

using purposive sampling to ensure representation from diverse academic backgrounds and internship types. This method enables focused data collection from individuals with direct experience relevant to the research objectives.

- vi). **Tools of Data Collection:** Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire, distributed online to students and recent graduates. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and open-ended questions to capture quantitative and qualitative insights. Additionally, informal interviews with a few respondents provided deeper context about their experiences and perceptions. Observation of internship announcements and organizational policies served as a supplementary source to understand general practices.
- vii). **Data Analysis Techniques:** Collected data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, percentages, and charts, were used to present trends and patterns in responses. Qualitative responses were analyzed thematically to identify recurring themes, concerns, and suggestions. Comparative analysis was conducted to evaluate differences in perceptions based on academic background, internship sector, and prior experience.

viii). Limitations of the Study

- The study is limited to interns and students who responded to the questionnaire, which may not represent all internship experiences across India.
- The sample size is relatively small, restricting the generalizability of the findings.
- Responses may be influenced by personal biases or recollection errors.
- The study focuses on perceptions and experiences, rather than formal legal adjudications, and does not include detailed organizational legal policies.

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

i). Demographic Profile of Respondents

The study collected responses from 139 participants, representing a diverse group of students across various age groups, genders, and years of study. The demographic profile provides insight into the nature of respondents who participated in the survey and helps in understanding the background context of the analysis.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	18–21 years	101	72.7%
	22–25 years	32	23.0%
	Above 25 years	6	4.3%
Gender	Male	39	28.1%
	Female	97	69.8%
	Prefer not to say	3	2.2%
Year of Study	1st Year	7	5.0%
	2nd Year	72	51.8%
	3rd Year	4	2.9%
	4th Year	17	12.2%
	5th Year	31	22.2%
	Postgraduate	6	4.3%
	Certificate/Other	30	21.6%

Interpretation

The majority of respondents (72.7%) belong to the 18–21 age group, indicating that most participants are undergraduate students currently pursuing their academic studies. A smaller proportion (23%) are in the 22–25 range, while only 4.3% are above 25 years, suggesting limited participation from working professionals or postgraduates.

In terms of gender distribution, female respondents (69.8%) significantly outnumber males (28.1%), showing higher female representation in the study. This may reflect a growing trend of female participation in internship and legal education sectors.

Regarding the academic level, more than half of the respondents (51.8%) are second-year students, followed by fifth-year students (22.2%). This indicates that the majority of respondents are in the middle or advanced stages of their academic programs, where internship exposure is typically higher. A small portion (4.3%) are postgraduates, showing that internship experience remains relevant even beyond undergraduate education.

Overall, the demographic distribution reflects a young, predominantly female student population, mostly in the 18–21 age range and actively engaged in academic or pre-professional training. This demographic context is essential for interpreting the following sections, which explore their internship experiences and perceptions toward legal and HR frameworks governing internships.

ii). Internship Participation and Nature of Work

This section focuses on the nature of internships undertaken by the respondents, including the number of internships completed, their academic area, and whether these internships were paid or unpaid. It helps to understand the general exposure students have to internships and the practical trends of unpaid labour in professional fields.

Table 2: Nature of Internship Participation

Aspect	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Have you ever undergone any internship?	Yes	88	63.3%
	No	51	36.7%
Number of internships completed	1	28	31.8%
	2	20	22.7%
	3 or more	40	45.5%
Academic field of internship	Law	58	65.9%
	Other fields (Admin, Medical, CS, etc.)	30	34.1%
Were any of your internships unpaid?	Yes, all unpaid	63	71.6%
	Some unpaid	17	19.3%
	All paid	8	9.1%

Interpretation

The findings reveal that a significant majority (63.3%) of respondents have participated in at least one internship, showing the growing importance of practical training in academic programs. Among them, nearly 45.5% have completed three or more internships, suggesting that internships are increasingly viewed as an essential part of skill-building and career development.

However, a concerning observation emerges when analyzing the nature of compensation. Around 71.6% of respondents

reported that *all their internships were unpaid*, while only 9.1% received consistent payment. This highlights a major gap in fair compensation and the lack of structured financial recognition for intern contributions.

The data also shows that law students (65.9%) form the majority of respondents, which aligns with the trend that legal internships, though mandatory, are often *unpaid and unregulated*. The presence of interns from other sectors such as medicine, administration, and IT shows that the issue of unpaid internships is not confined to a single field but reflects a broader structural imbalance in student-employer relations. In essence, this section highlights that while internships serve as important learning experiences, they are frequently conducted under unpaid or underpaid conditions, raising serious questions about labour exploitation and the need for legal safeguards.

iii). Working Hours and Nature of Internship Duties

This section analyses the workload of interns in terms of average working hours, alignment of assigned duties with the given job description, and the overall value and respect interns received during their tenure. The findings provide insight into the *working culture and treatment of interns*, especially in unpaid or underpaid internship structures.

Table 3: Working Hours and Nature of Internship Duties

Aspect	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Average working hours per day	Less than 3 hours	24	27.3%
	3–6 hours	49	55.7%
	More than 6 hours	15	17%
Did your internship duties match the job description?	Yes	46	52.3%
	Somewhat	39	44.3%
	Not at all	3	3.4%
To what extent was your work valued and respected?	1 Star	4	4.5%
	2 Stars	5	5.7%
	3 Stars	29	33.0%
	4 Stars	32	36.4%
	5 Stars	18	20.5%

Interpretation

The data reveals that the majority of interns (55.7%) worked between 3 to 6 hours per day, while 17% worked for more than 6 hours. This indicates that interns often undertake considerable workloads comparable to regular employees, despite many not receiving any form of monetary compensation. The findings underline the blurred boundary between *learning-oriented training* and *productive labour contribution*.

Regarding work allocation, 52.3% of respondents confirmed that their duties matched the job description provided, whereas 44.3% reported partial alignment. Only a small proportion (3.4%) stated that their tasks did not relate to the description at all. This partial mismatch suggests that in many cases, interns are made to perform administrative or clerical work unrelated to their field of study — a pattern particularly visible in legal and administrative internships.

When evaluating how their work was valued and respected, only 20.5% rated their experience with the highest score, while a significant portion (43%) gave moderate ratings (3 stars). This suggests that although interns gain exposure to professional environments, many still feel undervalued or treated as *temporary, replaceable helpers* rather than learners

contributing meaningfully to an organization.

Overall, this section reflects that most interns experience heavy workloads, often disproportionate to the recognition or compensation they receive. The data underscores the imbalance between contribution and reward, revealing the exploitative undertone present in several internship frameworks across India.

iv). Compensation, Stipend, and Legal Recognition of Internships

This section focuses on the financial and legal aspects of internships, particularly analyzing whether interns received offer letters, formal agreements, or any commitment for stipends. It also explores how far interns were compensated for their work and whether their positions were legally recognized or regulated.

Table 4: Compensation and Legal Formalities

Aspect	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Did you receive an official offer letter or contract?	Yes	26	29.5%
	No	62	70.5%
Was there any commitment for stipend (oral/written)?	Yes	14	15.9%
	No	74	84.1%
Were your internships paid or unpaid?	All unpaid	63	71.6%
	Some unpaid	17	19.3%
	All paid	8	9.1%

Interpretation

The results highlight a critical gap in the formal and legal regulation of internships in India. A substantial 70.5% of respondents reported that they did not receive any official offer letter or contract, which indicates the absence of a structured or documented relationship between interns and organizations. This lack of documentation leaves interns without any legal proof of their engagement, restricting their ability to claim rights or raise grievances in case of exploitation.

In terms of financial commitment, 84.1% of respondents stated that there was no promise of stipend—either oral or written—at the time of joining. Only a small minority (15.9%) mentioned that some assurance regarding payment was made. These figures clearly demonstrate how interns function in a legally ambiguous space, contributing to the organization's work without guaranteed compensation or recognition.

Further, an alarming 71.6% of respondents revealed that *all their internships were unpaid*, showing that the majority of students, particularly in law, are expected to work without remuneration under the pretext of “learning experience.” Only 9.1% reported consistently paid internships, indicating how rare fair financial treatment is in internship culture.

These findings reflect a systemic form of labour exploitation disguised under the label of academic or professional training. The absence of offer letters, stipend commitments, and contractual safeguards means interns operate outside the protection of India's labour laws, despite contributing meaningfully to the functioning of workplaces.

Overall, this data underscores the urgent need for legal recognition of interns as a protected category, ensuring written contracts, minimum stipends, and clear work boundaries. Without such reforms, the line between learning and exploitation continues to blur.

v). Post-Internship Opportunities and Perceptions on Legal Protection

This section examines whether internships translated into tangible job opportunities and how respondents perceive the need for legal regulation of internship practices. It reflects students' awareness of labour rights, fairness in compensation, and the necessity for policy intervention.

Table 5: Placement Opportunities and Legal Perceptions

Aspect	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Considered for placement/job after internship	Yes	23	26.1%
	No	63	73.9%
Should there be a minimum stipend mandated for all internships?	Yes	85	61.2%
	No	54	38.8%
Should unpaid internships be banned or legally regulated?	Yes	58	41.7%
	No	34	24.5%
	Not sure	47	33.8%
Interns should be protected by formal labour laws	Agree	122	87.7%
	Disagree	17	12.2%

Interpretation

The analysis reveals that only 26.1% of respondents were considered for placement or job opportunities after completing their internships, while a large majority (73.9%) were not. This clearly indicates that internships, though positioned as a stepping stone to employment, rarely lead to actual recruitment. Instead, they often serve as a temporary source of unpaid labour without long-term professional benefits.

When asked about the need for a minimum stipend, over 61% of respondents strongly supported mandatory payment for all internships, emphasizing that financial recognition is essential for equity and motivation. A notable 41.7% also believed unpaid internships should be banned or legally regulated, while around one-third (33.8%) remained uncertain—possibly due to the prevailing notion that unpaid internships are “necessary” for early career exposure.

The most significant outcome of this section is that 87.7% of respondents agreed that interns should be protected under formal labour laws, treating them similarly to regular employees in terms of basic rights, safety, and working conditions. This overwhelming agreement reflects a growing awareness among students that the current unregulated internship system leads to economic and professional exploitation.

Overall, the data shows a strong collective call for legal reform, better HR policies, and standardized protections to make internships both educational and ethically fair. The findings confirm that students are not only aware of their unequal treatment but are also demanding systemic change to ensure internships are recognized as legitimate and protected professional experiences.

vi). Factors Influencing Internship Choices and Motivation

This section explores the primary factors that influenced respondents' decisions when selecting internships and their underlying motivations for accepting unpaid or low-paid positions. It also examines how academic goals, career aspirations, and external pressures shaped their choices.

Table 6: Factors Influencing Internship Selection and Motivation

Influencing Factor	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Internship provides valuable practical exposure	82(59%)	47(33.8%)	7(5%)	3(2.2%)	0(0%)
Internship enhances future career opportunities	85(61.1%)	41(29.5%)	8(5.8%)	5(3.6%)	0(0%)
Selected internship mainly for academic credit	21(15.1%)	34(24.5%)	48(34.5%)	24(17.3%)	12(8.6%)
Chose internship due to company reputation	67(48.2%)	49(35.3%)	15(10.8%)	6(4.3%)	2(1.4%)
Accepted unpaid internship for experience over pay	53(38.1%)	61(43.9%)	16(11.5%)	7(5%)	2(1.4%)
Felt peer or institutional pressure to take internship	25(18%)	38(27.3%)	41(29.5%)	24(17.3%)	11(7.9%)

Interpretation

The data indicates that the primary motivation for undertaking internships lies in acquiring practical experience and career exposure. A combined 92.8% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that internships offer valuable learning opportunities, reinforcing their belief that real-world engagement complements academic knowledge.

Similarly, over 90% agreed that internships significantly enhance future employability. This shows a clear link between perceived career advancement and participation in internship programs, even when financial compensation is absent.

Interestingly, while academic credit played a role for some students (39.6%), it was not the dominant factor. This suggests that internships are viewed as more than academic requirements—they are essential pathways to skill development and networking.

A major deciding factor was the reputation of the organization—with 83.5% acknowledging that brand prestige influenced their choice. Many students preferred working with well-known firms or NGOs even without pay, as it strengthened their professional portfolio.

Moreover, 82% of respondents admitted they accepted unpaid internships primarily for the experience, underscoring a mindset that prioritizes exposure over earnings. However, this also reveals the inequality gap where only students with financial stability can afford such experiences.

Lastly, about 45% of respondents felt peer or institutional pressure to secure internships, suggesting that social and academic expectations heavily shape student decisions. This highlights the competitive environment in which internships are often pursued, sometimes at the expense of fair compensation or work-life balance.

Overall, this analysis reveals that while students are deeply motivated by learning, exposure, and reputation, the economic and regulatory imbalance surrounding unpaid internships remains a significant challenge. The findings call for more equitable systems that reward merit, ensure fair pay, and reduce undue academic or peer pressure.

5. Research Findings and Discussion

- i). **Major Findings in Relation to Objectives:** The study collected a total of 139 responses from students who have undergone internships across various sectors, with the majority being between 18–21 years of age (72.7%) and 69.8% identifying as female. This indicates that younger undergraduate students, particularly women, are the primary participants in internship programs, reflecting trends in professional courses such as law. In terms of academic background, most respondents were in their second year (51.8%), followed by fifth-year students (22.2%), highlighting that mid- to late-stage students are more actively pursuing internships.

Regarding participation, 63.3% of respondents reported having completed at least one internship, while 45.5% had undertaken three or more internships, emphasizing the growing importance of practical exposure for career readiness. Notably, a large proportion of internships were unpaid, with 71.6% of interns reporting that none of their internships offered a stipend and only 9.1% receiving consistent payment. Additionally, 70.5% of respondents did not receive an official offer letter or contract, and 84.1% had no prior commitment regarding stipends, demonstrating a lack of formal structure and legal clarity in many internship arrangements.

The study also examined the nature of internship duties and workload. While 52.3% of respondents stated that their assigned work matched the job description, 44.3% indicated only partial alignment, and 3.4% reported no alignment at all. Average daily working hours varied, with 55.7% working 3–6 hours and 17% exceeding six hours, reflecting significant variation in workload expectations. Despite this, perceptions of work value and respect were mixed; while 36.4% rated their work highly, 33% felt moderately valued, and a smaller portion rated their experience poorly.

Internship motivations were predominantly driven by the desire for practical experience (92.8%), exposure to new areas (64.7%), and career advancement opportunities (66.2%). Other factors, such as company reputation and academic requirements, played a lesser role. However, when considering unpaid internships, 38.8% accepted them primarily for job experience, 38.1% for exposure, and only a minority based on company reputation (8.6%), indicating that many students prioritize learning over remuneration.

Finally, the study explored the impact of internships on future opportunities and perceptions of legal protections. Only 26.1% were considered for placement or job opportunities post-internship, and a majority (87.7%) agreed that interns should be protected under formal labour laws. A significant number (61.2%) supported a mandated minimum stipend, while opinions on banning or regulating unpaid internships were divided, with 41.7% in favor, 24.5% against, and 33.8% unsure. Collectively, these findings highlight that while internships are valuable for skill development and career readiness, they are often unstructured, unpaid, and lacking formal recognition, pointing to the need for legal safeguards and standardized HR policies.

- ii). **Comparative Insights with Literature Review:** The findings of this study align with existing literature emphasizing the role of internships in bridging the gap between academic learning and professional exposure. Studies by Narayan (2019) and Kaur & Sharma (2021)

highlight that internships provide students with practical skills, workplace understanding, and career readiness [10, 11]. In the present study, a significant majority of respondents (92.8%) reported undertaking internships to gain practical experience, and 66.2% viewed them as a pathway to enhance future employment opportunities. This confirms that internships continue to serve as a vital tool for experiential learning, as suggested in previous research.

However, the study also reveals discrepancies between the theoretical purpose of internships and the reality of their implementation. While literature emphasizes structured mentorship, clear job roles, and fair compensation, the current findings indicate that 71.6% of internships were entirely unpaid, and 70.5% of respondents did not receive formal offer letters or contracts. This supports observations in prior Indian studies that highlight the exploitation of interns due to unregulated work arrangements, particularly in sectors such as law and media. Furthermore, 44.3% of respondents reported that their internship duties only somewhat matched the expected job description, pointing to a lack of alignment between intended learning outcomes and actual responsibilities—a gap that literature often identifies as a challenge in unstructured internships.

Another comparative insight relates to the influence of organizational reputation and networking. Previous studies suggest that students often prioritize internships in well-established organizations to strengthen their professional portfolio. This is consistent with the present findings, where 83.5% of respondents cited organizational reputation, experience, and exposure as key factors in accepting an internship, even if unpaid. At the same time, literature stresses the importance of recognition and mentorship in ensuring meaningful learning, whereas the study found mixed perceptions among respondents regarding respect and value for their work. Only 36.4% felt highly valued, highlighting a recurring concern about the professional environment offered to interns.

Overall, the comparative analysis confirms that while internships remain crucial for skill development and employability, the Indian context still exhibits gaps in formalization, mentorship, and remuneration. These findings highlight the need for HR policies and legal frameworks that align with theoretical expectations and ensure that internships are both educational and ethically implemented.

- iii). **Implications for Human Resource Management and Legal Framework:** The findings of this study underscore several important implications for Human Resource Management (HRM) and the legal regulation of internships in India. Firstly, the data clearly shows that the majority of internships are unpaid, with 71.6% of respondents reporting no stipend and only 29.5% receiving formal offer letters or contracts. This highlights the urgent need for HR departments to formalize internship programs, including clearly defined roles, written agreements, and structured supervision. By providing official documentation and clear expectations, organizations can reduce ambiguity, ensure accountability, and improve the overall internship experience. Secondly, the study emphasizes the necessity of stipends

or financial recognition for interns. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that a minimum stipend should be mandated, with 61.2% supporting this measure, and 87.7% advocating for interns to be protected under labour laws similar to regular employees. HR policies should therefore integrate fair compensation practices, considering interns' workload and contributions, while also acknowledging the financial constraints students face during unpaid internships. Providing remuneration, travel allowances, or other benefits can not only increase motivation but also promote equity, particularly for students from less privileged backgrounds.

Thirdly, the study demonstrates the need for mentorship and skill-focused supervision. Many respondents highlighted that internships often involve tasks unrelated to their academic or career objectives, with 44.3% stating that their duties only somewhat matched the job description. HR departments should implement structured mentoring, feedback mechanisms, and learning objectives that ensure internships are educational, rather than purely operational. This approach can enhance skill development, job readiness, and overall satisfaction, bridging the gap between practical exposure and academic learning.

Finally, the responses indicate the need for legal safeguards and regulatory frameworks. Students suggested clear policies regarding minimum pay, maximum working hours, fair treatment, and equal access to internship opportunities. Aligning HR practices with legal standards can ensure that internships are not exploitative while fostering a positive, supportive environment for interns. Collaboration between academic institutions and organizations to enforce such frameworks can further enhance accountability, standardization, and the professional value of internship programs.

In conclusion, the study emphasizes that HR departments and policymakers must prioritize structured internship programs, fair compensation, mentorship, and legal protections to transform internships into meaningful, educational, and ethically implemented experiences.

- iv). **Internship Motivation, Opportunities, and Career Impact:** The study findings reveal that students' motivations for undertaking internships are primarily driven by the desire to gain practical experience and enhance career readiness. A significant majority of respondents, 92.8%, reported that gaining job experience was their primary motivation, while 64.7% sought exposure to new professional environments. Additionally, 66.2% of students considered internships as opportunities to improve their career prospects, indicating that internships are viewed as critical stepping stones toward future employment. Organizational reputation also influenced decisions, though to a lesser extent, with 20.1% citing company prestige as a motivating factor. Despite the strong emphasis on learning and experience, a large number of students accepted unpaid internships. The survey revealed that 38.8% of respondents chose unpaid roles primarily for job experience, and 38.1% did so for exposure to new areas. Only a small proportion, 8.6%, accepted unpaid internships due to organizational reputation. This demonstrates that students often prioritize skill development and learning opportunities over financial compensation, even in the face of economic challenges. Nevertheless, the financial burden was evident, as 37.5% of respondents spent between INR

1,000–5,000 on internship-related expenses, while 52.3% managed to keep expenses under INR 1,000, reflecting varying financial capacities and the potential strain caused by unpaid internships.

In terms of career impact, only 26.1% of students reported receiving placement or job opportunities after completing an internship, leaving a significant majority without direct employment benefits from their internship experience. This underscores the need for better integration of internships with recruitment processes and highlights the importance of formal recognition for interns' contributions. Respondents also expressed strong support for legal reforms, with 41.7% advocating for regulation or banning of unpaid internships, and 87.7% agreeing that interns should be protected under formal labor laws, further reflecting the link between structured, legally compliant internships and career outcomes.

Overall, the data suggests that while internships remain highly valued for skill acquisition, exposure, and career preparation, there are gaps in translating these experiences into tangible career benefits. Ensuring structured mentorship, fair compensation, and stronger institutional support can maximize the positive impact of internships on students' professional growth.

- v). **Challenges and Perceived Exploitation:** The study highlights several challenges faced by students during internships, many of which reflect instances of perceived exploitation. A significant majority of respondents, 71.6%, reported that all of their internships were unpaid, while only 9.1% consistently received a stipend. Furthermore, 70.5% did not receive formal offer letters or contracts, and 84.1% reported no prior commitment regarding compensation, indicating a lack of formal structure and transparency in internship arrangements. These conditions suggest that many interns are contributing substantial work without adequate recognition, creating an imbalance between labor and benefit.

Interns also faced challenges related to workload and alignment with assigned responsibilities. While 52.3% of respondents stated that their internship duties matched the job description, 44.3% indicated only partial alignment, and 3.4% reported no alignment at all. Daily working hours varied, with 55.7% of students working 3–6 hours and 17% working more than six hours per day. Such discrepancies in workload, combined with limited formal recognition, contribute to feelings of underappreciation and frustration among interns. Perceptions of value and respect were mixed: only 36.4% felt highly valued, while 33% rated their experience moderately, and 10.2% rated it low.

Additionally, the lack of mentorship and structured learning was evident. Many respondents reported performing tasks unrelated to their academic or professional goals, and guidance from supervisors was limited, reflecting a broader challenge in ensuring educational outcomes from internships. These experiences contribute to a perception of exploitation, particularly among students who accepted unpaid roles primarily for experience and exposure rather than financial gain.

Legal and policy gaps exacerbate these challenges. Although 87.7% of respondents believe that interns should be protected under labor laws, and 61.2% support a mandated minimum stipend, current regulations are

insufficiently enforced. Suggestions from respondents included mandatory stipends, structured work hours, clear contracts, and mentorship programs to ensure that internships are educational, fair, and ethically managed. In summary, while internships offer critical learning opportunities, this study reveals persistent challenges related to unpaid labor, inadequate recognition, and limited legal protection, emphasizing the urgent need for reforms in HR policies and internship regulations.

6. Suggestions and Recommendations

- i). **Structured Internship and Mentorship Programs:** The findings of this study indicate that a major challenge faced by interns is the lack of structured guidance and meaningful mentorship during their internship experience. A significant proportion of respondents reported that their internship duties only partially aligned with the job description, and many were tasked with responsibilities unrelated to their academic or career goals. To address this, organizations should implement structured internship programs that clearly define the scope of work, learning objectives, and expected outcomes.

Mentorship programs are equally critical. Respondents emphasized the importance of receiving guidance, feedback, and support from experienced professionals, yet many interns lacked access to consistent supervision. By assigning dedicated mentors and scheduling regular feedback sessions, organizations can ensure that interns gain practical skills, develop professional confidence, and feel valued for their contributions. Structured programs also enable HR departments to monitor intern progress and ensure that educational objectives are being met, transforming internships from routine labor into meaningful professional development opportunities.

- ii). **Financial Support and Stipend Policies:** A key concern highlighted by the study is the prevalence of unpaid internships, with 71.6% of respondents reporting that none of their internships offered a stipend and only 9.1% receiving consistent payment. This lack of financial support places a considerable burden on students, especially when internship-related expenses such as travel, meals, and materials are added. To address this issue, organizations should implement standardized stipend policies that ensure fair compensation for interns' time, effort, and contributions.

Respondents also indicated that the absence of financial recognition often influenced their willingness to accept internship offers, particularly in unpaid roles where learning and exposure were the primary incentives. Providing a minimum stipend would not only alleviate financial stress but also promote equity, allowing students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to participate fully in internships. In addition, offering additional support, such as travel allowances or reimbursements for other expenses, can further enhance accessibility and encourage broader participation. Ultimately, financial support is essential to ensure that internships are both sustainable and valued as legitimate professional experiences rather than exploitative arrangements.

- iii). **Legal Frameworks and HR Policies for Intern Protection:** The study highlights the urgent need for legal safeguards and HR policies to protect interns from exploitation and ensure fair treatment. A majority of

respondents (87.7%) agreed that interns should be protected under labor laws similar to regular employees, while 61.2% supported mandating minimum stipends. Additionally, many students reported not receiving official offer letters, contracts, or prior commitments regarding stipends, reflecting a gap in formal recognition and legal protection for internship roles.

To address these challenges, organizations should implement HR policies that include written agreements, clear definitions of work responsibilities, maximum working hours, grievance redressal mechanisms, and anti-discrimination provisions. At the legal level, internships should be recognized under labor law frameworks, ensuring that students are entitled to fair compensation, regulated workloads, and safe working conditions. These measures would standardize internships, reduce misuse of unpaid labor, and enhance accountability. By integrating legal protections with HR policies, organizations can create an ethical, transparent, and equitable internship environment that benefits both students and institutions.

- iv). **Enhancing Internship Opportunities and Career Development:** The findings of this study reveal that while internships are primarily valued for gaining practical experience and career exposure, a majority of students do not receive subsequent placement or job opportunities.

Only 26.1% of respondents reported being considered for placement interviews after completing their internships, highlighting a gap between internship participation and tangible career outcomes. To address this, organizations and academic institutions should focus on enhancing internship opportunities that directly contribute to career development and employability. Internships should provide meaningful exposure aligned with students' academic disciplines and professional goals. Respondents emphasized the importance of practical learning, mentorship, and recognition for their contributions. Organizations can enhance engagement by offering structured feedback, certificates of completion, and opportunities for networking with industry professionals. Additionally, linking internships to recruitment or placement processes can make the experience more valuable and motivational for students.

By fostering an environment where internships are not merely temporary assignments but stepping stones for career growth, organizations can improve both the learning outcomes and long-term impact of internships.

7. Conclusion

- i). **Summary of the Study:** This research examined the experiences, challenges, and perceptions of students undertaking internships in India, with a particular focus on law and related sectors. The study collected data from 139 respondents, analyzing demographic factors, internship participation, stipend practices, workload, mentorship, and career outcomes. Findings indicate that a majority of students participate in internships to gain practical experience and improve employability, but many face challenges such as unpaid work, lack of formal contracts, and insufficient mentorship. Most internships were unpaid (71.6%), and 70.5% of respondents did not receive formal offer letters or contracts. Students often performed tasks only partially aligned with academic or career goals, and the majority reported varying levels of recognition and value for their

work.

The study highlights the need for structured internship programs, financial support, legal protections, and career-focused opportunities. Respondents recommended mandatory stipends, clear work contracts, mentorship, regulated work hours, and HR policies ensuring equitable access. Overall, the research emphasizes that while internships remain critical for skill development and career preparation, their effectiveness is dependent on formalization, ethical practices, and legal safeguards.

- ii). **Theoretical Contributions:** This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of internships in India by bridging the gap between academic learning and professional exposure. Existing literature emphasizes internships as tools for skill development, experiential learning, and career readiness. This research supports these theories by confirming that students primarily engage in internships to gain practical experience, enhance employability, and explore professional environments. The data also provides empirical evidence highlighting discrepancies between theoretical expectations and practical realities, such as unpaid work, lack of formal contracts, and limited mentorship. Additionally, the study reinforces the importance of frameworks that integrate labor law principles and HR management practices within internship programs. By examining student perceptions of fair treatment, workload, and financial recognition, the research adds a theoretical perspective on the ethical and legal dimensions of internships. The findings support the argument that internships must be structured and regulated to serve as meaningful educational experiences, rather than exploitative labor opportunities. Overall, this research expands the theoretical discourse on internship practices in India, emphasizing the intersection of experiential learning, labor ethics, and career development.

- iii). **Practical Contributions:** This study offers several practical contributions for educational institutions, organizations, and policymakers involved in designing and managing internships. Firstly, the research highlights the necessity for structured internship programs with defined learning objectives, mentorship, and evaluation criteria. Organizations can use these insights to develop internships that align more closely with students' academic and career goals, ensuring that their contributions are meaningful and educational. Secondly, the study underscores the importance of financial support and standardized stipend policies. The data reveals that unpaid internships and inconsistent compensation are widespread, creating financial challenges for students and potentially limiting participation. Implementing minimum stipends and reimbursing expenses can enhance equity, motivation, and overall engagement in internships. Thirdly, the research provides guidance for HR policies and legal frameworks. Formal contracts, regulated work hours, grievance redressal mechanisms, and recognition of interns under labor law principles are practical steps organizations can adopt to protect interns and ensure ethical practices. Finally, the study emphasizes career development benefits. Structured feedback, certification, networking opportunities, and alignment with placement processes can enhance the long-term impact of internships,

preparing students for professional success. Overall, these practical contributions provide a roadmap for improving internship quality, fairness, and effectiveness, benefiting students, organizations, and the broader educational ecosystem.

- iv). **Scope for Future Research:** This study provides a foundational understanding of internship experiences, challenges, and perceptions among students in India, but it also opens avenues for further research. Future studies could expand the sample size and include students from diverse academic disciplines and geographic regions to better understand variations across sectors. While this research focused primarily on law and professional internships, exploring internships in industries such as technology, healthcare, and business management could offer broader insights into sector-specific practices and challenges.

Additionally, future research could examine long-term career impacts of internships, including job placement, skill acquisition, and professional growth, to establish stronger links between internship experiences and employability outcomes. Comparative studies evaluating paid versus unpaid internships and their effects on student motivation, learning, and satisfaction would also provide valuable insights for policymakers and educational institutions.

Finally, research could focus on evaluating the implementation and effectiveness of legal frameworks and HR policies designed to regulate internships, providing evidence-based recommendations for improvements. By addressing these areas, future studies can contribute to more equitable, structured, and impactful internship programs, ensuring that internships serve as meaningful pathways for student learning and career development.

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