ISSN : 2962-9195 E-ISSN : 2963-8992

Journal of Educational Management Research
Vol. 05 No. 02 (2026) : 1016-1030
Available online at https://serambi.org/index.php/jemr

Bridging Soft Skills and Academic Success: The Mediating Role of Internship Performance

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.61987/jemr.v5i2.1828

Keywords:
Soft Skills, Academic Outcomes, Internship Performance

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the effect of students' soft skills on academic outcomes, with internship performance serving as a mediating variable. The research addresses the increasing importance of soft skills in higher education, particularly as artificial intelligence reshapes learning environments and demands for both analytical and interpersonal competencies. A quantitative research design was employed, utilizing Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to analyze the data. A total of 113 undergraduate students from the Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Lambung Mangkurat, who completed internships during 2024–2025, participated in this study by completing structured questionnaires. The results reveal that soft skill dimensions conceptual/analytical ability, teamwork, and information application have a significant positive effect on academic outcomes. Additionally, overall internship performance significantly mediates the relationship between soft skills and academic achievement. These findings suggest that internships not only prepare students for careers but also serve as a critical experiential learning mechanism that enhances academic engagement and performance. The study contributes to educational management by highlighting the role of internship experiences in bridging skill development and academic success, offering practical guidance for curriculum design and experiential learning programs.

Article History:
Received: November 2025; Revised: December 2025; Accepted: January 2026

Please cite this article in APA style as:
Athallah Akbar, M. A., Akbariani Ahmad, A., & Muhajad, A. (2026). Bridging Soft Skills and Academic Success: The Mediating Role of Internship Performance. *Journal of Educational Management Research, 5*(2), 1016-1030.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI), particularly AI-based tools such as chatbots, is reshaping the labor market and educational landscape, affecting entry-level employment opportunities for new graduates (Zahn, 2025). This shift has significant societal implications, as employers increasingly demand digitally competent professionals who can integrate

technology effectively into their work processes. In Indonesia, a survey conducted by the Ministry of Communication and Digital Affairs indicated that 69 corporate leaders would not hire candidates lacking AI-related skills (Grehenson, 2025). This highlights a growing mismatch between graduates' skill sets and the competencies required in the labor market, which can lead to underemployment and reduced employability among young professionals (Dewi & Manshur, 2026; Hefniy & Alwahedi, 2025; Holidi, 2025; Khofsah & Rozi, 2025). Therefore, higher education institutions are under pressure to equip students with not only technical knowledge but also essential soft skills that enhance adaptability, problem-solving, and workplace readiness. Addressing these societal challenges is critical for ensuring that graduates can thrive in increasingly technology-driven environments and contribute meaningfully to national economic and social development.

Despite the emphasis on technical competencies, graduates often struggle to meet employers' expectations regarding soft skills, such as analytical thinking, teamwork, and communication. Graduate employability is typically defined as a combination of skills and attributes that enable individuals to obtain and maintain employment while sustaining professional growth (Wahab, Hosen, Islam, & Chowdhur, 2025). However, mastery of academic content alone does not guarantee strong academic outcomes or job readiness (de Vries, Meeter, & Huizinga, 2024). This misalignment between academic preparation and labor market demands poses a critical challenge for both educators and policymakers, particularly in developing regions where experiential learning opportunities may be limited (Hikmah & Mudarris, 2026; Kusumawati, 2025; Syafiih, 2025). Consequently, universities must explore pedagogical strategies that integrate soft skill development into the curriculum, bridging the gap between classroom learning and workplace expectations, thereby enhancing students' professional competence, employability, and long-term career success.

In practice, many students face intense competition upon graduation, often contending with a high ratio of job applicants to available positions. For instance, the city of Banjarmasin reported 329 job vacancies but 326 applicants in 2024, while Universitas Lambung Mangkurat alone produced 914 D3 and undergraduate alumni during the same period (Kartika et al., 2024; Universitas Lambung Mangkurat, 2024). This scenario illustrates the pressure on graduates to demonstrate not only academic knowledge but also practical skills that distinguish them in the labor market (Badriyah, 2025; Khoiroh, 2025; Putri et al., 2024). Experiential learning programs, including internships, hands-on projects, and workplace placements, have been recognized as mechanisms to strengthen both academic performance and career readiness (Wahab, Hosen, Islam, & Chowdhur, 2025; Cheng, Chow, Lam, & Lee, 2023). By engaging in real-world

tasks, students can apply theoretical concepts, develop problem-solving capabilities, and enhance interpersonal skills, which are critical for meeting employer expectations and achieving professional success.

Previous research has explored the relationship between soft skills, employability, and academic performance. Studies have demonstrated that analytical thinking, teamwork, and the ability to apply information positively influence both learning outcomes and workplace readiness (Brandt & Lorié, 2024; Wahab, Hosen, Islam, & Chowdhur, 2025). Furthermore, internship experiences have been identified as a bridge connecting academic learning with practical application, enhancing students' confidence and engagement (Avleeva, Byrd, Pratt, & Gonzalez, 2025). However, while these studies provide valuable insights into employability and skill development, they often focus on employability outcomes rather than academic achievement, leaving a gap in understanding how experiential learning mediates the effect of soft skills on academic success. Addressing this gap is essential to optimize curriculum design and ensure that academic programs not only prepare students for work but also strengthen their performance within the academic environment.

Other studies have highlighted the challenges of evaluating experiential learning outcomes in regional public universities, where infrastructure and internship opportunities may differ from urban centers (Pulido & Rodríguez, 2025; Gerçek & Özveren, 2024). Additionally, the timing, scope, and assessment methods of internships vary, making it difficult to generalize findings from previous research to diverse educational contexts. This limitation underscores the need for localized empirical evidence examining how soft skills influence academic outcomes, particularly when mediated by internship performance. By situating this research within Universitas Lambung Mangkurat, the study contributes to filling the gap regarding experiential learning's role in linking soft skills and academic achievement in regional higher education institutions outside Java.

The novelty of this study lies in positioning internship performance as a learning-based mediator connecting soft skills with academic outcomes. Unlike prior research emphasizing employability or workplace readiness, this study focuses explicitly on academic performance, highlighting how internships serve as an integral educational mechanism. This approach provides a more holistic understanding of student development, demonstrating that internships not only prepare students for employment but also enhance engagement, motivation, and academic achievement. The examining regional university students, this research addresses the scarcity of empirical evidence from underrepresented geographic contexts, offering insights that can inform curriculum design, experiential learning programs, and policy development in similar educational settings.

Based on the literature review and observed gaps, this study investigates the extent to which students' soft skills affect academic outcomes, with overall internship rating functioning as a mediating variable. The research problem centers on whether experiential learning can amplify the academic benefits of soft skills, particularly in contexts with competitive job markets and variable internship quality. It is argued that internships operate not merely as career preparation but as a mechanism that reinforces soft skill application and improves academic engagement. Consequently, this study contributes to educational management by providing empirical evidence on the interplay between soft skills, internship performance, and academic achievement, offering actionable insights for curriculum planners, internship coordinators, and policymakers seeking to strengthen higher education's impact on student development and employability.

RESEACH METHOD

This study employed a quantitative research design, which relies on numerical data to systematically measure and analyze phenomena. Quantitative methods are suitable for testing hypotheses, identifying relationships between variables, and providing generalizable findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this study, the research focused on how students' soft skills specifically Conceptual/Analytical Ability, Teamwork, and Understanding and Applying Information affect academic outcomes, with Overall Internship Rating (OR) as a mediating variable. A quantitative approach was chosen because it allows for statistical analysis of relationships among multiple constructs, making it appropriate for examining both direct and indirect effects within a structured framework such as Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2021).

The study was conducted at the Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Lambung Mangkurat (FEB ULM), which offers a range of undergraduate programs in economics and business. This location was selected because FEB ULM actively facilitates internship programs for its students, providing a practical context for studying the relationship between soft skills, internship performance, and academic outcomes. Moreover, the university's student population is representative of regional public universities in Indonesia, allowing for insights that are relevant to similar higher education institutions outside Java (Pulido & Rodríguez, 2025).

Data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to 113 undergraduate students who completed internships in 2024–2025. The student sample was derived from direct reports provided by organizations where the students conducted internships, ensuring accurate identification of

respondents. The Slovin formula was applied to determine the sample size from the population of 148 eligible students, resulting in a sample of 113 (Slovin, 1960):

$$n = \frac{148}{1 + 148\ (0{,}05^2)} = 113$$

Questionnaire items were adapted from established literature and tailored to measure students' soft skills, Overall Internship Rating, and academic outcomes.

The study employed Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to analyze the data, using SmartPLS software. Analysis was conducted in two stages: first, the measurement (outer) model was assessed for reliability and validity; second, the structural (inner) model was evaluated to test hypothesized relationships among constructs (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2021). Structural model assessment included path coefficients, significance testing using bootstrapping, and evaluation of the mediating effect of Overall Internship Rating between soft skills and academic outcomes.

The validity and reliability of the instruments were evaluated through the measurement model. Convergent validity was examined via outer loadings and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), ensuring that each construct adequately measured the intended concept. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Composite Reliability (CR), confirming that constructs were measured consistently (Hair et al., 2021). All constructs were operationalized using indicators derived from prior research and adapted to the local context, ensuring both theoretical relevance and practical applicability. This rigorous validation process ensured that the study produced credible and reliable empirical evidence regarding the role of soft skills and internships in academic performance.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) is widely used to estimate structural equation models, particularly for composite-based modeling approaches. Following established guidance, the analysis was conducted in two steps: evaluation of the measurement (outer) model and assessment of the structural (inner) model (Hair Jr. et al., 2020). In SmartPLS, measurement model quality was examined using key criteria, including convergent validity, discriminant validity, and internal consistency reliability

Table 1. Outer Loading (Measurement Model) Result

	CAA	UAI	TMK	RAP	OR
X1.1 (CAA)	0,870				
X1.2 (CAA)	0,793				
X1.3 (CAA)	0,785				

X2.1 (UAI)	0,866			
X2.2 (UAI)	0,883			
X2.3 (UAI)	0,778			
X3.1 (TMK)		0,884		
X3.2 (TMK)		0,864		
X3.3 (TMK)		0,847		
Y1.1 (RAP)			0,831	
Y1.2 (RAP)			0,861	
Y1.3 (RAP)			0,719	
Z1 (OR)				1.000

As shown in Table 1, the indicators demonstrate satisfactory outer loadings, with values exceeding 0.70, indicating acceptable indicator reliability and supporting convergent validity at the item level. Convergent validity is further evaluated using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The AVE values are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) Result

Var.	Average variance extracted (AVE)
(X1) CAA	0,667
(X2) UAI	0,712
(X3) TMK	0,748
(Y) RAP	0,649

As reported in Table 2, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for all constructs exceed 0.50, indicating satisfactory convergent validity at the construct level. Taken together with the outer loading results, these findings provide consistent evidence that the measurement model achieves acceptable convergence and is suitable for subsequent structural model assessment. The cross-loading results generated in SmartPLS are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Cross-Loading Result

	(X1) CAA	(X2) UAI	(X3) TMK	(Y) RAP	(Z) OR
X1.1	0.870	0.540	0.460	0.423	0.327
X1.2	0.793	0.465	0.366	0.203	0.287
X1.3	0.785	0.514	0.379	0.090	0.309
X2.1	0.491	0.866	0.514	0.201	0.345
X2.2	0.576	0.883	0.418	0.206	0.434
X2.3	0.499	0.778	0.613	0.176	0.176
X3.1	0.504	0.479	0.884	0.241	0.341
X3.2	0.386	0.473	0.864	0.163	0.282
X3.3	0.395	0.540	0.847	0.263	0.341
Y1.1	0.208	0.158	0.198	0.831	0.398

Y1.2	0.380	0.341	0.349	0.861	0.429
Y1.3	0.190	0.022	0.054	0.719	0.354
Z1	0.376	0.406	0.376	0.491	1.000

Table 3 reports the cross-loading assessment, where each indicator is expected to load more strongly on its intended construct than on other constructs, thereby supporting discriminant validity at the indicator level. Discriminant validity is further evaluated using the Fornell–Larcker criterion, which examines whether the square root of each construct's AVE exceeds its correlations with other constructs. The Fornell–Larcker results for this study are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Fornell Lacker Criterion Result Data

Var.	CAA	OR	RAP	TMK	UAI
X1 (CAA)	0,817				
Z1 (OR)	0,376	1.000			
Y1 (RAP)	0,322	0,491	0,806		
X3(TMK)	0,499	0,376	0,263	0,865	
X2 (UAI)	0,619	0,406	0,231	0,578	0,844

Based on the Fornell–Larcker criterion reported in Table 4, the square root of the AVE for each construct is higher than its correlations with other constructs in the model, providing evidence of discriminant validity. For instance, the Relationship to Academic Program construct shows a value of 0.806 on the diagonal, which exceeds its correlations with the other variables, indicating adequate construct distinctiveness.

Regarding internal consistency, Hair Jr. et al. (2020) recommend Composite Reliability values of at least 0.70, with values around 0.70–0.80 commonly considered acceptable in empirical research. The composite reliability results presented in Table 5 suggest that the constructs in this study meet the recommended reliability threshold.

Table 5. Reability

Var.	Cronbach's alpha	Composite (rho_c)
CAA	0,762	0,857
RAP	0,728	0,847
TMK	0,833	0,899
UAI	0,806	0,881

As shown in Table 5, both Composite Reliability and Cronbach's alpha exceed the 0.70 threshold for all constructs, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. In addition, the preceding results support acceptable convergent

and discriminant validity for the measurement model. The next step assesses the structural (inner) model using SmartPLS. The inner model evaluation focuses on key indicators such as R^2 and effect size (f^2) to examine the strength and significance of relationships among constructs. The R^2 values for the endogenous variables are presented in Table 6

Table 6. R Square Value

Var.	R-square	R-square Adjusted
OR	0,210	0,202
RAP	0,272	0,263

Table 6 above shows the adjusted R-square value of the OR variable of 0.202. This indicates that the variables of Concept/Analytical Ability, Understanding and Applying Information, and Teamwork can explain the OR variable by 20%. It can be concluded that the model is considered weak, while the adjusted R-square value of the Relationship to Academic Program variable is 0.263, this indicates that the variables of Concept/Analytical Ability, Understanding and Applying Information, and Teamwork can explain the Relationship to Academic Program variable by 26.3%, so it can be concluded that the model is considered also weak. This is acceptable given the behavioral nature of the constructs. The Effect Size value can be seen in Table 7.

Table 7. Effect Size Value

	OR	RAP
X1 (CAA)	0,019	0,033
X2 (UAI)	0,027	0,008
X3(TMK)	0,025	0,003
Z1 (OR)		0,205

Based on the results of the effect size calculation using the PLS method in Table 7, it can be concluded that the influence of Concept/Analytical Ability on OR and Relationship to Academic Program is 0.019 and 0.033 respectively, indicating that the influence is moderate. Understanding and Applying Information also has a moderate influence on OR with a value of 0.027, but its influence on Relationship to Academic Program is quite weak with a value of 0.008. Teamwork has also a moderate influence on OR with a value of 0.025 but is weak on Relationship to Academic Program with a value of 0.003. Finally, OR has a strong influence on Relationship to Academic Program with a value of 0.205. These results indicate that exogenous variables contribute differently to endogenous variables, with some having a stronger influence on certain aspects. The data from the results of the Hypothesis Testing of this research can be seen in table 8.

Table 8. Hypothesis Testing Result Data

	Original sample	t statistic	p values	hypothesist
CAA → RAP	0,070	2,894	0,004	Accepted
TMK → RAP	0,077	2,388	0,017	Accepted
UAI → RAP	0,088	2,926	0,003	Accepted
CAA → OR → RAP	0,070	2,894	0,004	Accepted
TMK → OR → RAP	0,077	2,388	0,017	Accepted
UAI → OR → RAP	0,088	2,926	0,003	Accepted

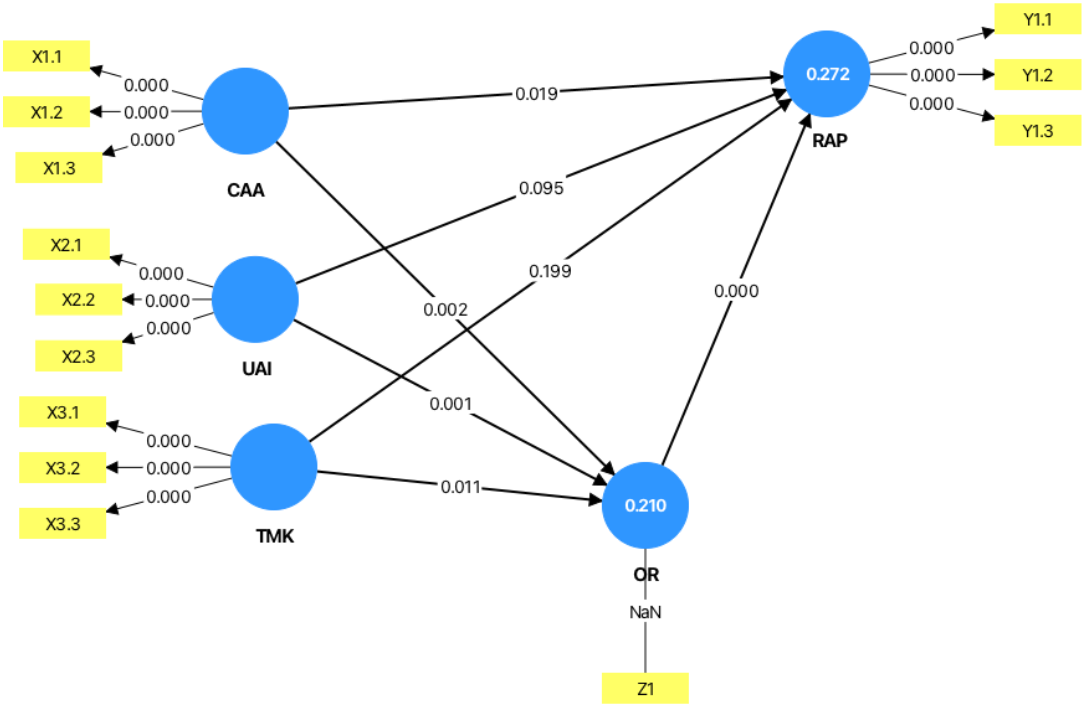

Figure 1. Structural Model of Hypothesis Testing

Based on the SmartPLS analysis, this study provides a clearer understanding of how key soft skill dimensions conceptual and analytical ability, understanding and applying information, and teamwork contribute to academic outcomes both directly and through internship performance as an intervening variable. In managerial terms, these findings highlight the role of soft skills as foundational competencies that shape early-stage performance and readiness within talent development pipelines. Internship performance, as reflected by the overall internship rating, functions as a critical mechanism through which individual competencies are translated into meaningful academic engagement and alignment with institutional learning objectives.

The results are consistent with prior research emphasizing the strategic value of experiential learning in strengthening individual attachment and

performance outcomes. For instance, Avleeva et al. (2025) demonstrate that positive internship performance serves as a key outcome of experiential learning, fostering stronger emotional and professional connections between individuals and their academic programs. Interpreted through a management lens, this suggests that well-structured internship experiences not only enhance individual capability development but also reinforce commitment and alignment with organizational learning systems, thereby supporting sustainable human capital development within higher education institutions.

Moreover, the assessment of multiple soft-skill dimensions suggests that several competencies are associated with higher overall internship ratings. In particular, conceptual/analytical ability and the ability to understand and apply information show positive contributions to internship performance. In addition, teamwork is positively related to overall internship rating, indicating that collaborative capability supports performance in experiential learning contexts.

The results also show that conceptual and analytical ability is positively and significantly associated with students' relationship to their academic program. This finding implies that stronger analytical thinking and conceptual understanding are linked to greater academic engagement and program alignment. From an organizational standpoint, these competencies represent key cognitive resources that facilitate learning effectiveness and early-stage performance development. This pattern is consistent with prior evidence that cognitive ability is a strong predictor of academic performance (Feraco et al., 2023).

Interpreted in the context of human capital development, strong conceptual and analytical skills enable individuals to better interpret academic demands, integrate knowledge, and perceive greater relevance in their learning activities. This alignment enhances students' commitment to their academic programs and supports sustained performance outcomes. Therefore, efforts to strengthen students' conceptual and analytical abilities should be regarded as a strategic investment, as these competencies play a critical role in reinforcing academic engagement and preparing individuals for future professional and organizational environments.

The results indicate that teamwork has a positive and significant influence on students' relationship with their academic program. This finding suggests that students who demonstrate stronger collaborative capabilities tend to show higher levels of engagement and alignment with their academic studies. In terms of organizational practice, teamwork represents a critical interpersonal competency that supports collective learning processes and enhances individual integration within structured learning systems. The significance of this relationship highlights the role of collaboration in shaping positive academic

experiences and sustained commitment to educational programs.

Consistent with prior research, effective teamwork facilitates knowledge sharing, peer learning, and mutual support among students, which in turn improves understanding of academic content and strengthens program relevance (Wang et al., 2024). Interpreted through a management and human capital lens, teamwork skills contribute not only to academic coordination but also to the development of collaborative behaviors that are essential in organizational environments. Therefore, fostering teamwork competencies should be considered a strategic component of academic and talent development, as these skills reinforce students' engagement with their academic programs and prepare them for collaborative professional settings.

The findings indicate that understanding and applying information has a positive and significant effect on students' relationship with their academic program. This result suggests that students who are more capable of interpreting, processing, and applying information tend to demonstrate stronger engagement and alignment with their academic studies. In organizational settings, this capability reflects an essential cognitive and operational skill that supports effective learning performance and knowledge utilization within structured educational systems.

Consistent with previous studies, the ability to understand and apply information enables individuals to better connect theoretical knowledge with academic tasks and broader institutional activities, thereby enhancing the perceived relevance of their academic programs (Feraco et al., 2023). From a human capital development perspective, this skill represents a foundational competence that supports goal attainment, learning continuity, and performance readiness. Consequently, strengthening students' ability to effectively understand and apply information should be considered a strategic priority, as it contributes to sustained academic engagement and prepares individuals for information-intensive professional environments.

The findings provide empirical evidence that conceptual and analytical ability has a significant indirect effect on students' relationship with their academic program through overall internship rating. This result means that cognitive competencies contribute more effectively to academic outcomes when they are expressed through performance in experiential learning settings. Within organizational contexts, internship performance serves as a critical conduit that enables individual analytical capabilities to be transformed into measurable learning engagement and academic alignment.

Consistent with prior research, strong conceptual and analytical abilities such as evaluating solutions, problem solving, and generating new ideas enhance students' performance during internships, which subsequently strengthens their

connection with academic programs. As part of broader human capital development processes, this mediated relationship suggests that the development of analytical competencies should be strategically integrated with structured internship experiences. By strengthening these cognitive skills and providing performance-oriented experiential learning opportunities, institutions can enhance internship outcomes and, ultimately, support more sustainable academic performance and early-stage talent readiness.

The results indicate that teamwork has a significant indirect effect on students' relationship with their academic program through overall internship rating. This finding suggests that collaborative competencies contribute to academic alignment primarily when they are enacted through performance in experiential learning contexts. From an organizational management perspective, teamwork represents a core interpersonal capability that enhances coordination, adaptability, and shared goal attainment attributes that are critical for effective performance during internships.

Viewed through a human capital development framework, students with stronger teamwork abilities are more likely to perform effectively in organizational settings, which subsequently strengthens their engagement and alignment with academic programs. This mediated relationship underscores the importance of integrating collaborative skill development with structured internship experiences, as such alignment enables teamwork competencies to be translated into measurable performance outcomes and sustained academic engagement.

The findings further demonstrate that the ability to understand and apply information has a significant indirect effect on students' relationship with their academic program through overall internship rating. This result indicates that information-processing and application skills enhance academic outcomes most effectively when they are operationalized through performance-based experiential learning. From a managerial standpoint, this capability reflects an essential functional skill that supports initiative, accountability, and effective task execution within organizational environments.

Consistent with prior research, students who can interpret information accurately and apply it responsibly tend to perform better during internships, which in turn strengthens their academic alignment. Interpreted within a human capital development perspective, this mediated effect highlights the strategic role of internships in converting information-related competencies into tangible performance outcomes. Accordingly, fostering students' ability to understand and apply information, alongside structured internship evaluation, can enhance internship performance and support more sustainable academic success.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that students' soft skills particularly conceptual/analytical ability, teamwork, and the ability to understand and apply information have a positive and significant effect on academic outcomes, with overall internship rating serving as a mediating mechanism that strengthens this relationship. This highlights that internships are not merely preparatory activities for employment but act as performance-based learning platforms, enabling students to apply, refine, and contextualize their soft skills in real academic and workplace scenarios. The key lesson derived from this research is that structured experiential learning, such as internships, can enhance students' academic engagement and outcomes by translating competencies into measurable performance. These insights underscore the importance of integrating soft skill development and practical learning opportunities into higher education curricula to better prepare students for both academic success and future employability.

This study contributes to the academic literature by positioning internship performance as a learning-based mediator that links soft skills to academic achievement, filling a gap in empirical research on regional public universities outside Java. Despite these contributions, the study has limitations, including a focus on a single faculty and university, a relatively small sample size, and reliance on cross-sectional data, which limits the ability to capture long-term effects. Future research could expand the scope to multiple institutions and faculties, include longitudinal designs to examine changes over time, and explore additional mediating or moderating variables such as motivation, resilience, or technological proficiency to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how soft skills and experiential learning jointly influence academic outcomes.

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