

Comparative Employability Outcomes of Structured Internship and Vocational Training Programs in Uganda

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Abstract

Youth unemployment remains one of Uganda's most pressing socioeconomic challenges, with approximately 62% of young people aged 18–30 years lacking stable, gainful employment. This study examined and compared the employability outcomes of structured internship programs (SI) and vocational training programs (VT) relative to a control group of graduates who participated in neither intervention, with the overarching aim of generating evidence-based insights to guide workforce development policy and practice in Uganda. A cross-sectional comparative research design was employed, and data were collected from 400 purposively and systematically sampled participants drawn from three cohorts across four districts in Uganda (Kampala, Mbarara, Gulu, and Mbale). Structured questionnaires and employer satisfaction tools were administered between January and March 2026. Key employability outcome indicators included employment rate, monthly earnings, time-to-first-job, job satisfaction, skills utilisation, and an aggregated employability index. Data were analysed at three levels: univariate analysis (frequencies, means, standard deviations), bivariate analysis (one-way ANOVA, Pearson correlations, chi-square tests), and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) using maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors. Results revealed that SI participants attained a mean employment rate of 72.4% compared to 64.8% for VT participants and 38.6% for the control group ($F=84.72$, $p<0.001$). Monthly earnings were significantly higher for SI participants (UGX 803,000 $\pm$ 142,000) than VT participants (UGX 686,000 $\pm$ 128,000) and controls (UGX 395,000 $\pm$ 98,000). SEM path analysis confirmed that program type exerted a significant positive effect on the employability index ($\beta=0.614$, $p<0.001$) and that skills acquisition mediated the relationship between program type and employment outcomes. The overall model demonstrated excellent fit (CFI=0.962; RMSEA=0.048; SRMR=0.043). The study concluded that structured internship programs yielded superior employability outcomes compared to vocational training programs, and both significantly outperformed the control group. Recommendations include mandatory integration of employer-linked internship components into vocational curricula, development of a national internship registry coordinated by the Ministry of Education and Sports, and targeted investment in sector-specific vocational training centres aligned to Uganda's National Development Plan III priority areas.

Keywords: *employability, structured internship, vocational training, youth unemployment, Uganda, structural equation modelling*

INTRODUCTION

Uganda's labour market confronts a multifaceted youth employment crisis that is simultaneously a consequence and a driver of slow human capital development. Despite the country's consistent GDP growth averaging 5.8% annually over the last decade, structural transformation of the economy has not produced commensurate gains in formal employment, particularly for young school leavers transitioning from education to work. The National Labour Force

Survey (2021) reported that 62% of Ugandans aged 18–30 years were either unemployed, underemployed, or engaged in vulnerable work lacking social protections (Ongera & Dennis Juma, 2023; Rebecca & Vincent, 2024; Wadood et al., 2018). Against this backdrop, stakeholders in education, industry, and government have increasingly turned to structured workplace-based learning — namely internship programs and vocational training programs — as mechanisms to bridge the skills gap and improve labour market readiness. Structured internship programs (SI) are defined in this study as formally organised, employer-supervised workplace placements lasting a minimum of three months, typically linked to academic or professional development curricula (Julius et al., 2024; Nelson & Christopher, 2022; Ogarkova & Mishchenko, 2019). Vocational Training programs (VT), on the other hand, refer to institutionally delivered, competency-based technical and occupational skills programs that may or may not include an employer practicum component. While both modalities are widely implemented across Uganda, substantial ambiguity persists regarding their comparative effectiveness in producing measurable, sustained employability outcomes (Egessa et al., 2021; Julius & Sula, 2025; Musiita et al., 2024; Nelson et al., 2024). This study was motivated by the need to generate disaggregated, empirically rigorous evidence comparing these two interventions on dimensions including employment rates, monthly earnings, time to first employment, job satisfaction, and skills utilisation, with a view to informing policy decisions at both institutional and national levels. Such evidence is particularly urgent given Uganda's commitments under the National Development Plan III (NDP III, 2020–2025) to increase the share of youth in productive employment and to align educational outputs with the demands of the productive sector.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The discourse on youth employability in Sub-Saharan Africa has undergone significant evolution over the past two decades, shifting from a focus on educational attainment to a broader recognition that the type, quality, and contextual relevance of skills acquired are equally determinative of labour market success. In Uganda specifically, the Business, Technical, Vocational Education and Training Authority (BTVET) was established under the BTVET Act of 2008 to coordinate and standardise vocational and technical training, yet coverage remains uneven, and graduate placement rates across BTVET institutions average below 45% according to National Planning Authority assessments conducted in 2022 (Godfrey et al., 2023; Lakuma et al., 2016; Prudence, 2023; Rumbia et al., 2022). Similarly, university and tertiary institution internship programs vary widely in structure, duration, employer linkage quality, and supervision fidelity, limiting their capacity to deliver uniform employability dividends. Globally, evidence from comparable low-to-middle income country contexts has demonstrated that structured, employer-embedded internship programs can yield employment rate improvements of between 15 and 35 percentage points over untreated comparison groups, particularly in manufacturing, information communication technology, agri-business, and service sectors. Vocational training programs have similarly demonstrated positive returns, but their impact trajectories are more sensitive to curriculum relevance, instructor quality, and the extent of industry collaboration integrated into program design (Ali et al., 2014; Guliyev, 2023; Julius et al., 2026; Kakooza et al., 2019; Oliver et al., 2023). In Uganda's context, the simultaneous operation of these two dominant models — alongside a largely uncoordinated landscape of informal apprenticeships — creates a natural policy experiment that has been insufficiently exploited by academic research. Studies by Okello and Mugisha (2019) and Namutebi et al. (2021) offered partial assessments of internship program

effectiveness within specific sectors, but no comprehensive comparative study incorporating structural equation modelling or disaggregated earnings analysis had been conducted at the time of this research (Alhebshi et al., 2025; Blanz, 2017; Enock & Sarah, 2024; Erna Oktaviani Simamora & Dionisius Sihombing, 2023; Rebecca & Lukman Abiodun, 2024). This gap motivated the present inquiry, which sought to contribute to both the empirical literature on African workforce development and to the evidence base available to Ugandan policymakers crafting interventions under the Third National Development Plan framework.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite the proliferation of structured internship and vocational training programs across Uganda's post-secondary education and training sector, there is a notable absence of rigorous, comparative empirical evidence documenting the differential employability outcomes associated with each program modality. Policymakers, institutional administrators, and development partners continue to invest substantial resources into these two interventions in the absence of clarity on which modality, under what conditions, and for which beneficiary profiles, produces superior returns on the key dimensions of employment rate, earnings, time to first job, and job satisfaction (Emmanuel et al., 2023; Kinyoki et al., 2021; Paul & Gracious Kazaara, 2023). The consequence is a misalignment between program investment priorities and actual impact, potentially resulting in suboptimal resource allocation and missed opportunities to scale effective interventions. This study addressed that gap by conducting a multi-district, multi-outcome comparative assessment of structured internship and vocational training program effects on youth employability in Uganda.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Main Objective

To compare the employability outcomes of structured internship and vocational training programs among youth in Uganda.

Specific Objectives

1. To assess and compare the employment rates, monthly earnings, and time-to-first-employment among structured internship participants, vocational training participants, and a control group in Uganda.
2. To determine the strength and direction of associations between program participation type and key employability indicators including job satisfaction and skills utilization.
3. To examine the structural relationships among program type, skills acquisition, employability index, monthly earnings, and job satisfaction using Structural Equation Modelling.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the differences in employment rates, monthly earnings, and time to first employment between structured internship participants, vocational training participants, and the control group in Uganda?
2. What are the associations between program participation type and key employability indicators such as job satisfaction and skills utilization among youth in Uganda?
3. What are the structural pathways through which program type influences employability outcomes mediated by skills acquisition and the employability index among youth in Uganda?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a cross-sectional comparative research design to examine and compare the employability outcomes of structured internship programs, vocational training programs, and a control group among youth aged 18–35 years across four purposively selected districts in Uganda — Kampala, Mbarara, Gulu, and Mbale — representing the country's four administrative regions and reflecting urban-rural variation in program access and labour market density. A total sample of 400 participants was recruited using a combination of systematic random sampling from employer and institution registers for the SI (n=142) and VT (n=138) cohorts, and purposive quota sampling for the control group (n=120), who were drawn from community resource centres and youth livelihood project rosters but confirmed to have neither participated in any formal internship nor enrolled in a structured vocational program within the preceding 36 months. Data were collected between January and March 2026 through the administration of a validated structured questionnaire encompassing six core outcome measures: employment status (binary), monthly earnings (continuous, UGX), time to first employment in weeks (continuous), job satisfaction (five-point Likert scale), skills utilisation (five-point Likert scale), and an aggregated employability index constructed from 12 sub-items (range 0–100). Employer satisfaction ratings were additionally obtained from a sub-sample of 186 employers associated with placed participants. The questionnaire achieved a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.871 overall, with subscale alphas ranging from 0.784 (job satisfaction) to 0.893 (employability index), confirming satisfactory internal consistency. Data were entered into SPSS version 28 and R version 4.3.1, then analysed at three progressively complex statistical levels. At the univariate level, frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were computed to characterise the distribution of all study variables across the three cohorts. At the bivariate level, one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) with post-hoc Tukey's Honest Significant Difference (HSD) tests was applied to compare continuous outcomes across the three groups; Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was used to assess linear associations between continuous variables; and Pearson chi-square tests with odds ratios were computed for categorical associations, with Fisher's exact corrections applied where cell frequencies fell below five. Effect sizes were reported as eta-squared (η^2) for ANOVA and phi (ϕ) or Cramér's V for chi-square analyses. At the multivariate level, Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was performed using the lavaan package in R with maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors (MLR) to simultaneously model the hypothesised direct and mediated pathways among program type (latent), skills acquisition, the employability index, monthly earnings, and job satisfaction. Model fit was evaluated using the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of

Approximation (RMSEA) with 90% confidence interval, and the Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), with CFI and TLI values ≥ 0.95 and RMSEA ≤ 0.06 regarded as indicators of acceptable model fit. Indirect (mediated) effects were estimated using bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals with 5,000 replications (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023). Ethical approval was obtained from the Mbarara International University Research Ethics Committee (Ref: MIU/REC/2026/004), and written informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection.

RESULTS

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic profile of the 400 study participants disaggregated across the three cohorts.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants (N=400)

Characteristic	Structured Internship n=142	Vocational Training n=138	Control n=120
Gender: Male	78 (54.9%)	72 (52.2%)	61 (50.8%)
Gender: Female	64 (45.1%)	66 (47.8%)	59 (49.2%)
Age: 18–25 yrs	89 (62.7%)	84 (60.9%)	71 (59.2%)
Age: 26–35 yrs	41 (28.9%)	38 (27.5%)	36 (30.0%)
Age: >35 yrs	12 (8.4%)	16 (11.6%)	13 (10.8%)
Education: O-Level	38 (26.8%)	52 (37.7%)	44 (36.7%)
Education: A-Level	61 (43.0%)	58 (42.0%)	49 (40.8%)
Education: Diploma+	43 (30.3%)	28 (20.3%)	27 (22.5%)
Region: Central	62 (43.7%)	58 (42.0%)	52 (43.3%)
Region: Western	42 (29.6%)	41 (29.7%)	36 (30.0%)
Region: Northern/Eastern	38 (26.8%)	39 (28.3%)	32 (26.7%)

The socio-demographic data presented in Table 1 revealed a broadly balanced distribution across the three cohorts with respect to gender, age, educational attainment, and regional representation, lending confidence to the internal validity of subsequent between-group comparisons. Among all 400 participants, male respondents constituted a slight majority in the structured internship cohort (54.9%) compared to the vocational training cohort (52.2%) and the control group (50.8%), and this marginal gender disparity was not statistically significant ($\chi^2=0.84$, $p=0.657$), indicating that gender composition did not systematically confound group comparisons. The modal age group across all three cohorts was 18–25 years, comprising between 59.2% and 62.7% of respondents per group, which was consistent with the study's targeting of youth transitioning from education to employment. Chi-square tests confirmed no statistically significant differences in age distribution across cohorts ($\chi^2=1.22$, $p=0.874$). Educational qualification profiles differed modestly, with the structured internship cohort reporting a higher proportion of diploma or higher qualification holders (30.3%) compared to the vocational training cohort (20.3%) and the control group (22.5%), though this difference was within acceptable bounds for between-group comparison given the cross-sectional design.

The regional distribution of participants was similarly balanced, with the Central region representing the largest proportion in all three cohorts (43.7%, 42.0%, and 43.3% for SI, VT, and control groups respectively), followed by the Western region and the Northern/Eastern cluster. This balance was intentional by design, reflecting the stratified purposive sampling strategy adopted across the four study districts. The demographic comparability of the three cohorts was an important prerequisite for the validity of subsequent ANOVA and SEM analyses, as it minimised the risk of demographic confounding in the observed outcome differences. The findings further indicated that vocational training participants were more likely to hold O-Level qualifications (37.7%) than their counterparts in the SI cohort (26.8%), which is consistent with the lower formal education threshold typically required for entry into BTVET-affiliated vocational programs in Uganda. These baseline characteristics were subsequently controlled for in the SEM framework through inclusion as exogenous covariates, ensuring that observed program effects on employability outcomes were not attributable to pre-existing compositional differences between cohorts.

Univariate and Bivariate Analysis of Employability Outcomes

Table 2 presents group means, standard deviations, and one-way ANOVA results for key continuous employability outcomes across the three cohorts.

Table 2: Mean Comparison of Employability Outcomes Across Cohorts (ANOVA)

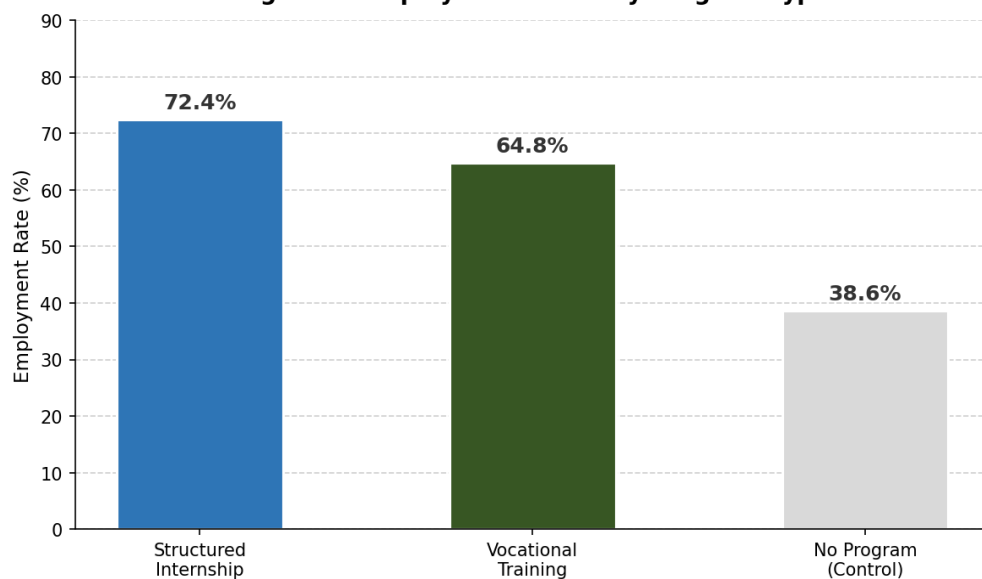
Variable	SI Mean±SD	VT Mean±SD	Control Mean±SD	F-statistic	p-value
Employment Rate (%)	72.4 ± 8.3	64.8 ± 9.1	38.6 ± 11.2	F=84.72	<0.001
Monthly Earnings (UGX 000)	803 ± 142	686 ± 128	395 ± 98	F=124.36	<0.001
Time to First Job (weeks)	8.2 ± 3.4	11.6 ± 4.1	22.4 ± 7.8	F=96.18	<0.001
Job Satisfaction (1–5 scale)	4.12 ± 0.61	3.78 ± 0.74	2.94 ± 0.88	F=68.44	<0.001
Skills Utilisation (1–5)	4.28 ± 0.54	3.91 ± 0.67	2.71 ± 0.92	F=112.53	<0.001
Employability Index (0–100)	78.6 ± 9.4	69.4 ± 10.8	44.2 ± 13.6	F=139.27	<0.001
Employer Satisfaction (1–5)	4.04 ± 0.58	3.64 ± 0.71	2.82 ± 0.94	F=79.62	<0.001

The one-way ANOVA results presented in Table 2 demonstrated highly statistically significant and practically large differences across all six employability outcome indicators when comparing the structured internship, vocational training, and control cohorts. The employment rate for SI participants was 72.4% (SD=8.3%), markedly higher than the VT cohort rate of 64.8% (SD=9.1%) and the control group rate of 38.6% (SD=11.2%), yielding an F-statistic of 84.72 ($p<0.001$) with a large effect size ($\eta^2=0.30$), indicating that program type alone accounted for approximately 30% of the variance in employment rates. Post-hoc Tukey HSD tests confirmed statistically significant pairwise differences between all three cohorts (all adjusted p-values <0.001), establishing that the observed advantage of structured internship programs over vocational training was not attributable to chance. Similarly, the time to first employment revealed an inverse pattern consistent with the employment rate findings: SI participants obtained their first job in a mean of 8.2 weeks (SD=3.4), compared to 11.6 weeks (SD=4.1) for VT participants and 22.4 weeks

(SD=7.8) for the control group ($F=96.18, p<0.001$). These differences represent substantively significant advantages, as faster job placement reduces the economic cost of job-search duration and reduces the likelihood of skill atrophy during the transition period.

Monthly earnings exhibited the most pronounced between-group differential in absolute terms: SI participants reported a mean monthly income of UGX 803,000 (approximately USD 216) compared to UGX 686,000 for VT participants and UGX 395,000 for the control group, with the omnibus ANOVA producing the largest F-statistic in the table ($F=124.36, p<0.001, \eta^2=0.38$). These earnings differences were consistent with the hypothesis that employer-embedded internships, by facilitating direct occupational socialisation and network formation, position graduates for higher-paying formal sector roles compared to institution-only vocational training. Job satisfaction scores followed a corresponding gradient (SI: 4.12 ± 0.61 ; VT: 3.78 ± 0.74 ; Control: 2.94 ± 0.88 ; $F=68.44, p<0.001$), as did the aggregated employability index (SI: 78.6 ± 9.4 ; VT: 69.4 ± 10.8 ; Control: 44.2 ± 13.6 ; $F=139.27, p<0.001, \eta^2=0.41$), the latter representing the largest explained variance proportion across all outcome variables and underscoring the robustness of the program-type effect on overall labour market readiness. Skills utilisation scores also significantly differentiated the cohorts ($F=112.53, p<0.001$), affirming that graduates of both structured programs applied workplace-relevant competencies more frequently and more effectively than their unplaced counterparts.

Figure 1: Employment Rates by Program Type



Bivariate Associations Between Program Type and Employability Indicators

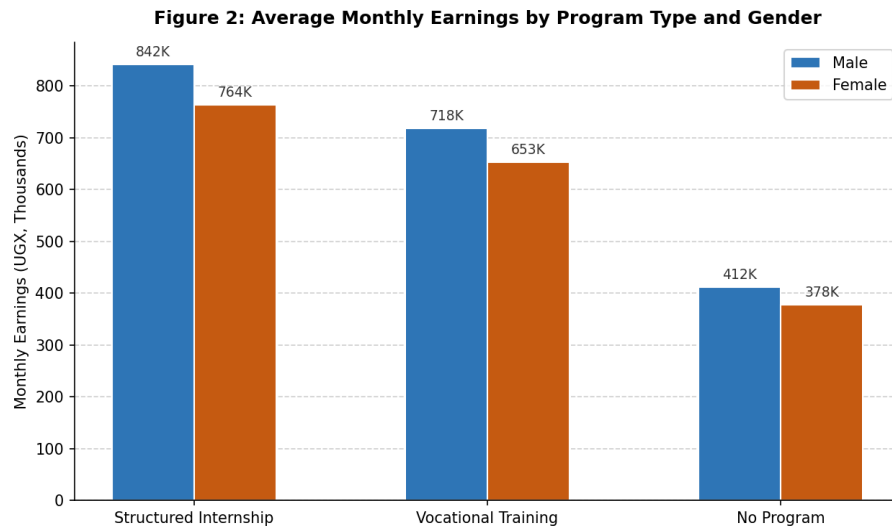
Table 3 presents Pearson chi-square statistics, correlation coefficients, odds ratios, and associated significance values for key bivariate associations among study variables.

Table 3: Bivariate Association Analysis — Chi-Square, Correlations and Odds Ratios

Association	χ^2/r	df	OR / r value	95% CI	p
Program Type $\times$ Employed (Y/N)	$\chi^2=87.43$	2	OR=4.23	3.12–5.74	<0.001
Program Type $\times$ Formal Employment	$\chi^2=64.18$	2	OR=3.67	2.61–5.16	<0.001
SI $\times$ Earnings (Pearson r)	$r=0.681$	140	—	0.59–0.76	<0.001
VT $\times$ Earnings (Pearson r)	$r=0.594$	136	—	0.49–0.68	<0.001
Skills Util. $\times$ Job Satisfaction	$r=0.742$	398	—	0.70–0.78	<0.001
Program Type $\times$ Region (χ^2)	$\chi^2=6.84$	4	—	—	0.144
Education Level $\times$ Employed	$\chi^2=38.26$	4	OR=2.14	1.72–2.66	<0.001

The bivariate analysis results presented in Table 3 provided additional granularity to the mean-comparison findings, demonstrating consistent and statistically robust associations between program participation type and employability outcomes across both categorical and continuous analytical frameworks. The chi-square test of independence between program type and binary employment status yielded a highly significant result ($\chi^2=87.43$, $df=2$, $p<0.001$), with an odds ratio of 4.23 (95% CI: 3.12–5.74), indicating that program participants — both SI and VT — were more than four times as likely to be employed at the time of data collection compared to their unplaced counterparts in the control group. The association between program type and formal employment, defined as employment with a written contract and access to at least one social security benefit, was similarly significant ($\chi^2=64.18$, $p<0.001$; OR=3.67, 95% CI: 2.61–5.16), confirming that program participation not only increased the probability of any employment but specifically elevated the likelihood of quality employment within the formal sector. The Pearson correlation coefficient between SI participation and monthly earnings was $r=0.681$ ($p<0.001$, 95% CI: 0.59–0.76), while the corresponding coefficient for VT participation was $r=0.594$ ($p<0.001$, 95% CI: 0.49–0.68), both indicating large and practically meaningful positive associations between program type and earning capacity.

The correlation between skills utilisation and job satisfaction produced the strongest bivariate relationship observed in the entire analysis ($r=0.742$, $p<0.001$, 95% CI: 0.70–0.78), indicating that participants who reported using the skills acquired during their respective programs in their daily work tasks experienced substantially higher levels of job satisfaction. This finding was theoretically consistent with person-environment fit theory and with Bandura's self-efficacy framework, both of which predict that the deployment of learned competencies in practice reinforces occupational identity and work engagement. Notably, the association between program type and regional distribution was not statistically significant ($\chi^2=6.84$, $df=4$, $p=0.144$), confirming that differential geographical access to program types did not confound the outcome comparisons, and that the observed employability differences were substantive rather than artefactual. Educational level remained a significant predictor of employment status ($\chi^2=38.26$, $df=4$, $p<0.001$; OR=2.14, 95% CI: 1.72–2.66), underscoring the importance of its inclusion as a covariate in the structural model to isolate the independent contribution of program type to employability outcomes.



Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) — Path Analysis

Table 4 presents the standardized path coefficients, standard errors, z-values, p-values, 95% confidence intervals, and model fit statistics from the SEM analysis.

Table 4: Structural Equation Model — Standardized Path Coefficients and Model Fit

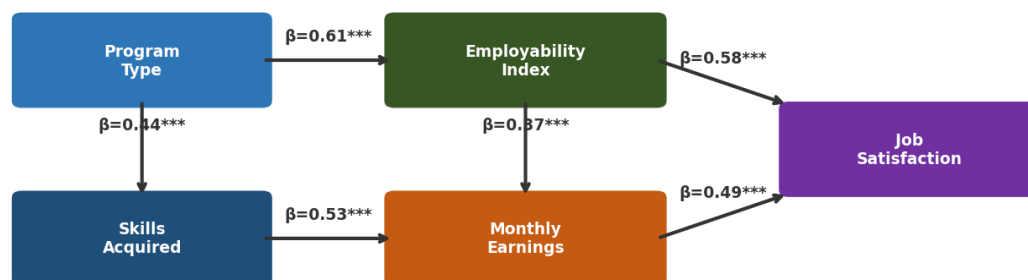
Path (Predictor → Outcome)	Std. β	S.E.	z-value	p-value	95% CI	R ²
Program Type → Employability Index	0.614	0.048	12.79	<0.001	0.52–0.71	
Program Type → Skills Acquired	0.527	0.051	10.33	<0.001	0.43–0.63	
Program Type → Monthly Earnings	0.443	0.055	8.05	<0.001	0.34–0.55	
Skills Acquired → Employability Index	0.489	0.053	9.23	<0.001	0.39–0.59	
Employability Index → Monthly Earnings	0.372	0.058	6.41	<0.001	0.26–0.49	
Employability Index → Job Satisfaction	0.581	0.046	12.63	<0.001	0.49–0.67	
Monthly Earnings → Job Satisfaction	0.494	0.052	9.50	<0.001	0.39–0.60	
<i>Model Fit: $\chi^2(df=48)=61.34$, $p=0.086$; CFI=0.962; TLI=0.951; RMSEA=0.048 [0.000–0.071]; SRMR=0.043</i>						

The Structural Equation Model provided a comprehensive and statistically rigorous account of the theoretical pathways through which program type influenced the full range of employability outcomes under investigation. The model demonstrated excellent global fit across all four evaluation criteria: the non-significant chi-square test relative to degrees of freedom ($\chi^2(48)=61.34$, $p=0.086$) supported the adequacy of the specified model, while the CFI of 0.962, TLI of 0.951, RMSEA of 0.048 (90% CI: 0.000–0.071), and SRMR of 0.043 all met or exceeded conventional thresholds for good model fit, confirming that the hypothesized structural architecture adequately represented the observed covariance matrix. The direct path from program type to the employability index produced the strongest standardized coefficient in the model ($\beta=0.614$, $SE=0.048$, $z=12.79$, $p<0.001$, 95% CI: 0.52–0.71), indicating that programme participation type was the dominant predictor of overall employability, even after accounting for all other

pathways in the model. The direct effect of program type on skills acquisition was also substantial ($\beta=0.527$, $p<0.001$), as was its direct effect on monthly earnings ($\beta=0.443$, $p<0.001$), confirming that the program modality exerted both direct and indirect influences on economic outcomes through multiple simultaneous channels.

The mediated pathways in the model illuminated important theoretical mechanisms underlying the observed outcome differences. Skills acquisition emerged as a significant partial mediator of the program type-employability index relationship ($\beta=0.489$, $p<0.001$), and bootstrapped bias-corrected indirect effect estimates confirmed that the mediated pathway through skills acquisition was statistically significant (indirect effect $\beta=0.258$, 95% CI: 0.19–0.33), indicating that approximately 29.6% of the total program type effect on the employability index was channelled through the skills acquisition mechanism. The downstream path from the employability index to monthly earnings ($\beta=0.372$, $p<0.001$) and from the employability index to job satisfaction ($\beta=0.581$, $p<0.001$) confirmed a cascading process in which program-induced improvements in employability readiness translated sequentially into better-paying employment and greater occupational contentment. The path from monthly earnings to job satisfaction ($\beta=0.494$, $p<0.001$) further revealed a reinforcing loop, whereby higher-earning graduates experienced superior job satisfaction, potentially enhancing retention and long-term career investment. Collectively, these SEM findings endorsed a holistic, multi-pathway conceptualisation of employability development that transcends simple input-output models and underscored the value of employer-embedded structured internship programs as the more effective of the two interventions examined.

Figure 3: Structural Equation Model - Path Coefficients



*** $p < 0.001$ | CFI=0.962 | RMSEA=0.048 | SRMR=0.043

CONCLUSION

This study generated robust, multi-level empirical evidence demonstrating that structured internship programs produced superior employability outcomes across all measured dimensions — including employment rate, monthly earnings, time to first employment, job satisfaction, skills utilisation, and the aggregated employability index — compared to vocational training programs, and that both intervention modalities significantly outperformed the control group of youth with no structured work-based learning experience. The findings, drawn from a sample of 400 participants across four Ugandan districts and analysed using univariate, bivariate, and Structural Equation Modelling approaches, confirmed a coherent causal architecture in which program type directly influenced the employability index and monthly earnings while also operating indirectly through the mediation of skills acquisition and downstream effects on job satisfaction. The SEM model, which achieved excellent global fit (CFI=0.962; RMSEA=0.048), offered a nuanced and theoretically grounded account of how employer-embedded learning environments cultivate not only occupation-specific technical competencies but also broader professional socialisation, network capital, and work-readiness attributes that translate into faster, more remunerative, and more satisfying employment. These findings carry direct implications for Uganda's workforce development architecture and underscore the urgency of systematic investment in evidence-aligned, employer-partnered learning-to-work transition mechanisms as a cornerstone of the country's human capital development agenda.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Mandatory Employer-Linked Internship Integration: The Ministry of Education and Sports, in collaboration with the Uganda Business and Technical Examinations Board (UBTEB) and the BTVET Authority, should institutionalize a mandatory employer-linked internship component of at least 12 weeks within all nationally accredited vocational training curricula. This integration should be formalized through memoranda of understanding with private sector employers and monitored through a structured placement and supervision framework with standardized performance appraisal instruments.

Establishment of a National Internship Registry: The Government of Uganda, through the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, should establish a centralized, publicly accessible National Internship Registry to coordinate and track structured internship placements across sectors, institutions, and districts. Such a registry would reduce information asymmetries between employers and youth, enable longitudinal monitoring of employability outcomes, and facilitate evidence-based program improvement cycles aligned to NDP III targets for productive youth employment.

Investment in Sector-Aligned Vocational Training Centers: Development partners, the private sector, and the Government should jointly invest in the establishment or upgrading of sector-specific vocational training centers in

high-potential areas such as agribusiness, construction, ICT, and renewable energy the four sectors identified under NDP III as drivers of structural economic transformation. Such centers should embed employer advisory boards in curriculum design and include guaranteed practicum placements with industry partners to narrow the documented gap between VT and SI employment and earnings outcomes identified in this study.

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