

Understanding Internship Value from Key Stakeholders' Perspectives in Tourism Entrepreneurship

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Abstract: Internships play a key role in tourism and hospitality education, bridging academic learning and practical experience. They serve as spaces where academic and professional domains intersect, enabling students to navigate multiple roles and perspectives. In Estonia, many students already work in the sector and complete internships at their current workplace. While this provides valuable experiential learning, it also creates challenges for universities in supervision and coordination. This study explores the value created through such internships, drawing on value proposition theory and a modified version of Osterwalder's Business Model Canvas, alongside concepts of boundary crossing and role clarity. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through focus groups and interviews with students, university coordinators, and workplace supervisors. Findings show that although internships benefit all stakeholders, students often face role conflicts as employees, interns, and learners, blurring the educational purpose. Workplace supervisors' roles are often unclear, and universities focus mainly on administrative tasks rather than meaningful collaboration with industry partners. The study emphasizes clearer role definitions, stronger university–employer cooperation, and reflective practices to enhance learning and organizational development.

Keywords: Internship, Current Workplace, Value, Tourism Entrepreneurship, Higher Education, Estonia

1. Introduction

Internships in tourism entrepreneurship link academic learning with professional experience, allowing students to apply theoretical knowledge in real contexts. When structured and supported, internships strengthen engagement and competence development (Van Wingerden et al, 2018; Pusiran et al, 2020). However, insufficient coordination between educators and enterprises often reduces their effectiveness (Veliverronena and Grinfelde, 2018; Bilslund et al, 2020). Successful programs require collaboration among universities, employers, and students, framed by value-based and entrepreneurial learning approaches (Adiba et al, 2023; Hutasuhut et al, 2020). Despite extensive research, most studies focus on students' experiences, leaving the perspectives of educators and employers underexplored (Zopiatis et al, 2021). This study views internships as co-creative learning environments where universities and employers jointly produce value through collaboration. Grounded in value creation and boundary-crossing theories (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011), internships are seen as bridges connecting academic and professional practice, helping students navigate multiple roles.

At two Estonian universities, internships form about 17–18% of the tourism entrepreneurship curriculum, comprising three four-week placements over three years. Despite their importance, limited research examines how internships create value for students already employed at their placement sites. A 2024 survey (n=41) revealed that 32% of first-year students worked full-time, 34% part-time, 12% were entrepreneurs, and 22% unemployed. Given their diverse situations, internships must provide mutual value to all stakeholders. This requires boundary crossing: universities must grasp employer needs, employers must appreciate learning outcomes, and students must balance triple roles as learners, interns, and employees (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011; Mejia and Wickey-Byrd, 2023).

The study aims to understand the value of internships in the tourism sector from the perspectives of students, universities, and enterprises, focusing especially on cases where internships occur at the student's current workplace. The central research question is: *What value do tourism entrepreneurship internships provide to students, universities, and enterprises, particularly when conducted at students' existing workplaces?* The theoretical section reviews academic literature on value creation and boundary crossing, while the empirical part explores how collaboration generates value through learning. The findings yield recommendations for universities to strengthen stakeholder cooperation within tourism entrepreneurship curricula.

2. Theoretical Background

Internship value in tourism education can be analyzed through three frameworks: the curriculum innovation canvas (Willness and Bruni-Bossio, 2017), boundary crossing theory (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011), and workplace learning and mentorship (Tynjälä 2008; Zhou et al, 2022). Together, these illustrate how internships foster collaboration, learning, and stakeholder value.

The business model canvas from Osterwalder was selected as one of the central theoretical foundations, as it describes how an organization generates value, delivers it to customers, and benefits from it (Osterwalder 2004; DaSilva and Trkman, 2014). Osterwalder's theory is particularly effective in examining value, such as facilitating multi-stakeholder collaboration, which supports the co-creation of innovative educational experiences (Willness and Bruni-Bossio, 2017). Osterwalder's business model canvas is a versatile tool that can be adapted to various contexts, such as helping define what creates value while balancing authenticity by making a profit (Carter and Carter, 2020) or functioning as a checklist to assess value creation, capture, and delivery in entrepreneurship (Sort and Nielsen, 2018). Building on this foundation, the curriculum innovation canvas of Willness and Bruni-Bossio (2017), structurally inspired by Osterwalder's model, fosters creative thinking, multi-stakeholder collaboration, and continuous curriculum improvement. It emphasizes co-creation and the long-term improvement of academic programmes to create value for stakeholders.

Improving internship programs enhances their value proposition, benefiting students, employers, and universities, and supporting human capital development (Van Wingerden et al, 2018; Pusiran et al, 2020). As key contributors to workforce development, education providers must align their programs with the needs of students and the tourism industry (OECD, 2024; Wormald, 2013). A value proposition, which explains why customers choose one option over another (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010), in the context of internships reflects the relevance and outcomes that students and employers' value. Its strength depends on leadership, structure, and product knowledge (Payne et al, 2017), as well as organizational and psychological resources like mentorship and job rotation, which foster clarity, satisfaction, and commitment (Zhou et al, 2022; To and Lung, 2020).

Hotels, as common internship sites, support career development by promoting role clarity (Yu et al, 2024), which enhances learning and performance (Capitano et al, 2022; Suan and Nasurdin, 2013). However, roles with high autonomy and low formalization may increase ambiguity for interns. Supervision and mentoring are central to internship quality, as they facilitate the transformation of tacit into explicit knowledge and help students connect theory with practice through reflective activities such as discussions, portfolios, and written assignments (Tynjälä, 2008; Hora et al, 2023). A meaningful internship enhances engagement and strengthens value propositions for students and institutions. Holistic employee experience, relevant also for interns, requires aligned systems and leadership (Panneerselvam and Balaraman, 2022). Engagement, gratitude, and customer value foster loyalty (Qi et al, 2023), while structured employer involvement connects students with professionals (Mason et al, 2022). Internships bridge academia and industry, improving employability and offering fresh perspectives (Della Volpe, 2017). Key factors for students include compensation, clarity, autonomy, and supervision (Hora et al, 2023). Challenges like delays and uncooperative hosts require effective coordination (Soffi and Mohamad, 2021).

Internships involve boundary crossing, as students move from the classroom to the workplace, a process that requires both mental and emotional adaptation (Mejia and Wickey-Byrd, 2023). Boundaries offer learning opportunities through identification, coordination, reflection, and transformation (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011). Work-integrated learning supports professional growth via reflection (Tynjälä, 2008; Roosipõld et al, 2020), while transformative learning requires self-reflection and openness (Soomere et al, 2024; Taylor and Cranton, 2013). Collaboration between universities and industry fosters knowledge integration (Ruiz-Cantisani et al, 2021), and real-world experience is vital for adaptation (Tynjälä et al, 2020; Saadat and Saadat, 2016; Anwar and Abdullah, 2021; Leary and Sherlock, 2020). Sustaining change in higher education requires treating organizational change as a learning process (Boström et al, 2024; Dee and Leisyte, 2017), with transformative and organizational learning key to embedding sustainability (Trevisan et al, 2024). The internship value model canvas (Figure 1) developed on curriculum innovation canvas by Willness and Bruni-Bossio (2017), the boundary crossing concept (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011), and role clarity perspectives (Capitano et al, 2022; Suan and Nasurdin, 2013) illustrate the value model canvas for internships, where placements at students' current workplaces generate value for all stakeholders.

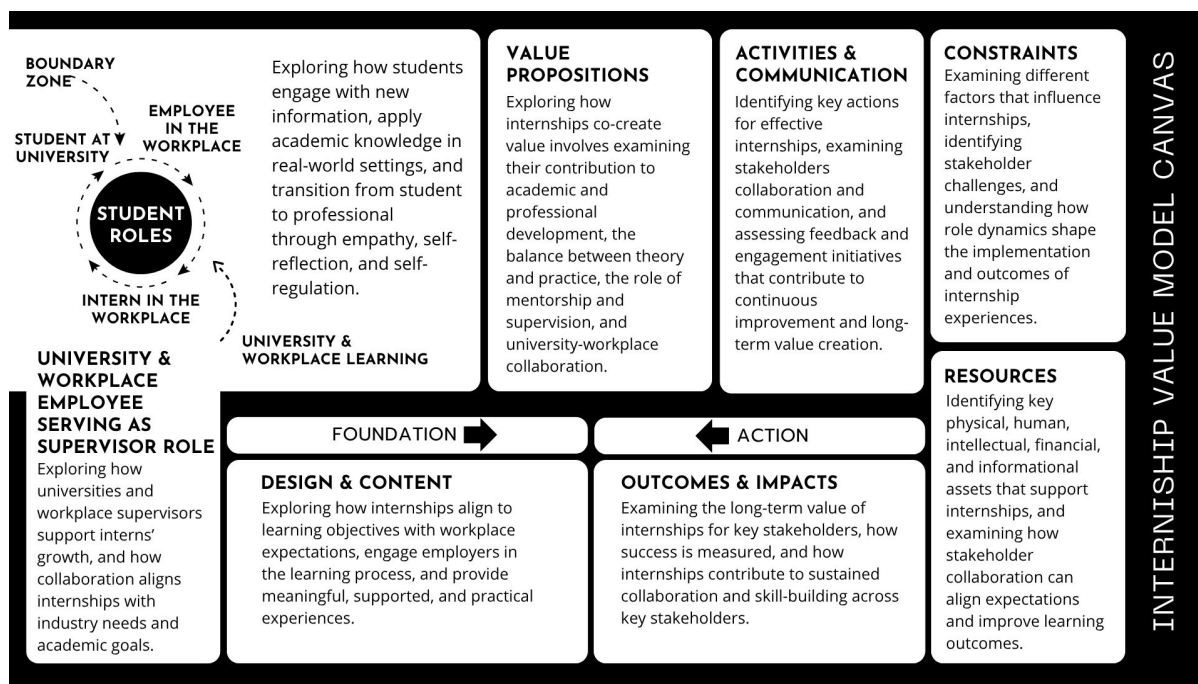


Figure 1: Internship value model canvas developed on curriculum innovation canvas by Willness and Bruni-Bossio (2017), the boundary crossing concept (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011), and role clarity perspectives (Capitano et al, 2022; Suan and Nasurdin, 2013).

Based on the curriculum innovation canvas, boundary-crossing theory, and role clarity, it emphasizes active implementation. The foundation phase builds relationships and content, whereas the action phase transforms these into learning outcomes. The central value proposition links all elements, and flexible design highlights student identity and co-created value at the intersection of academic and workplace learning.

3. Research Methodology

This study applied a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore internships from the perspectives of students, supervisors, and universities, complemented by illustrative quantitative data. Due to the small and specialized sample, universal sampling was used to ensure comprehensive inclusion (Czernek-Marszałek and McCabe, 2024).

Participants included:

- 14 students from two Estonian universities, completing internships in their current workplaces.
- 5 enterprise supervisors.
- 6 university representatives (internship specialists, program managers, and heads of studies), with one person holding a dual role.

The interview framework addressed role clarity, value propositions, activities, resources, constraints, and outcomes (Figure 1). This approach enabled a deep understanding of value creation in tourism internships, emphasizing boundary crossing and stakeholder collaboration.

3.1 Data Collection

Data were collected via focus groups and individual interviews conducted online (MS Teams). A pilot interview helped refine questions. Interviews were held in Estonian to ensure natural expression, with questions adapted from an English-language framework. Semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility, and data saturation was reached after interviewing five internship organizations (two hotels, one hotel restaurant, two leisure/cultural entities). Confidentiality was maintained through coded identifiers (Table 1)

Table 1: Background information of the participants.

Participant	Group or individual interview	Length of an interview
S-1 to S-4	Group interview 1	1 hour 40 minutes
S-5 to S-8	Group interview 2	1 hour 20 minutes
S-9 to S-11	Group interview 3	1 hour 5 minutes
S-12, S-13, S-14	Individual interview	average 35 minutes
U-1 to U-5	Individual interview	average 55 minutes
W-1 to W-5	Individual interview	average 50 minutes

Abbreviations: S – student; U – university representative; W – workplace representative

3.2 Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and analyzed using both deductive and inductive approaches. The deductive analysis was guided by predefined categories from the theoretical framework, including value propositions, activities, resources, constraints, outcomes, and roles, while the inductive coding helped identify meaningful content within these categories.

During the coding process, inductive methods were used to extract meaning from the data, focusing on identifying the content that aligned with predefined categories. Each key stakeholder group (universities, students, and workplaces) was analyzed, and relevant textual excerpts were assigned to each category. This allows for context-sensitive interpretation while maintaining a structured analytical lens. Once coded, the content within each category was compared across stakeholder groups to identify similarities and differences between them. These cross-group comparisons highlight shared and conflicting views. The results are presented according to theoretical categories, ensuring a systematic structure that supports interpretation and clarity. The analysis concludes with a summary of the main findings and practical recommendations based on the data.

3.3 Results

The results are structured thematically, beginning with stakeholder roles and interactions in the boundary zone, which shape students’ experiences and clarify the value proposition. According to the internship value model canvas (Figure 1), students often identify more as employees than interns or students do, leading to role conflict and blurred boundaries, especially when tasks lack clarity. The students’ roles, based on the insights of the interviews, are shown in Figure 2.

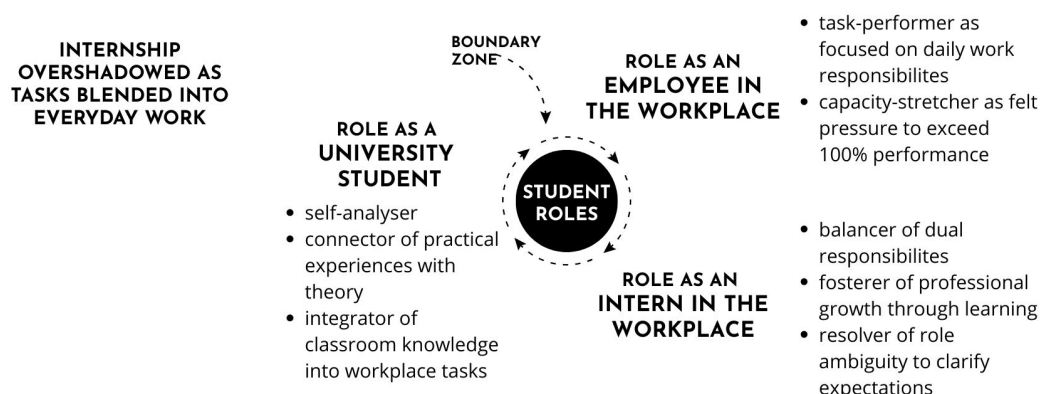


Figure 2: Students’ roles according to the insights of interviews.

Students emphasized the need for clearer supervisor roles and suggested short, practical training for workplace mentors. They recommended more constructive and practice-oriented feedback from university supervisors.

Despite these challenges, internships remain valuable for applying academic knowledge and encouraging active, reflective learning.

3.3.1 Design and Content

Internships at current workplaces were seen as convenient, but the academic report was viewed as bureaucratic and disconnected. Students suggested shorter formats, clearer links to coursework, and greater employer involvement. Universities acknowledged the need to better communicate internship value, while employers requested standardized guidance.

It could be in the enterprises' own interest (so that internship reports reach the workplace). I would be interested. (U-2)

All stakeholders saw value in short-term job shadowing and cross-organizational experiences to broaden learning, although concerns about confidentiality and limited resources were noted. Students supported the idea if they aligned with their work and studies.

Short-term job shadowing would be a nice experience but difficult to implement. Good idea. (S-10)

Universities recognize the potential but would need to take an active role in coordination. Employers support this idea in principle, especially in similar sectors, but highlight the need for clear structures and agreements to ensure feasibility and clear outcomes.

3.3.2 Activities and Communication

Supervision varied: some students felt supported, others left alone. University visits were appreciated when practical advice was offered.

I felt that guidance from the university was minimal or invisible. (S-2)

Workplace supervision was informal and continuous, while university cooperation was often formal and distant. Feedback was mostly brief, and students desired more engagement.

Supervision flows well; I do not set a specific time for it; we talk during working hours. (W-1)

Universities differed: one relied on individual initiatives, the other had formal partnerships but lacked integration of feedback into curriculum.

Employers valued feedback and proposed tools like supervisor logbooks, stressing the need for mentor training and university collaboration.

3.3.3 Resources

Universities provided multilayered support (seminars, guidance, digital tools). Both used tripartite agreements, though formats varied. Workplaces often saw them as formalities. Interns already employed were treated as staff; new interns lacked onboarding materials.

We do not have any designated guidelines on how to proceed when an intern arrives. (W-4)

Workplaces offered practical tasks and access to resources, but lacked standardized procedures.

3.3.4 Constraints

Students found report writing complex, and noted employer resistance, unclear supervision, and digital system limitations. At one university, enterprise representatives lacked access to assessment tools; at the other, placement availability was the main issue. Workplaces cited time constraints and seasonality as barriers.

It is difficult to plan your own time resources to supervise the interns. (W-3)

Despite challenges, internships were seen as essential for linking theory and practice.

You can combine theory with practical life. (S-11)

Here, he (intern) experiences real-life moments and can take them back to university. To turn them into learning opportunities. (W-5)

Motivation issues arose from unclear expectations and poorly defined tasks, with misaligned timing adding further complexity.

3.3.5 Outcomes and Impacts

Students valued internships for applying theory to practice, learning new tools (e.g., Canva), expanding networks, and exploring career paths. Internships improved communication skills and confidence.

I have applied the knowledge gained at the university during my internship to improve my job. (S-1)

Experience varied by initiative—some found tasks repetitive and lacking novelty.

It has not created any special value for me, as I have done this work before, and it is just a reinforcement. I did not experience any 'wow' effect. (S-7)

Internships in current workplaces felt safe and familiar, though finding external placements was difficult. Summer timing raised concerns; students suggested spreading internships and reporting throughout the year. Many emphasized personal growth and confidence.

I was pretty much a scaredy-cat... now I write to enterprises myself and am not afraid of hearing 'no.' (S-12)

Internships helped clarify career direction and sometimes led to employment. Their value was greater when aligned with studies and offered new tasks.

3.3.6 Value Propositions

Students noted limited employer engagement and rare structured communication between universities and enterprises. Universities emphasized internships as a bridge between theory and practice, and called for more intellectually challenging tasks.

...Internship tasks should be transformed into smaller projects or cases that would challenge students intellectually as well. You have a real organization and a real problem, and as a team, we (students) need to solve it... (U-1)

Traditional formats were less valuable for employed students, prompting universities to explore alternatives like project-based internships. Flexibility and individual tailoring were seen as key to increasing relevance.

It has not created any special value for me, as I have done this work before, and it is just a reinforcement. (S-7)

The value of internships is greater for those who are still looking for direction in the tourism field, as it gives them an opportunity to experience a real work environment and decide whether the field suits them. For employed students who complete internships in their current workplace, the value is seen more in the opportunity to engage with new tasks and expand their skills in the field. Since some students did not see the value of internships, implementing this new approach could bring a clear change to them. Like students, university representatives agree that internships help to connect academic knowledge with real work practices. They see the potential to offer more flexible and individually tailored internships to better meet students' needs. Merely performing routine work is not considered valuable.

Universities acknowledged the need for better coordination with employers, especially in supervision and curriculum integration. Employers valued interns for fresh perspectives and ideas, but stressed the importance of clear expectations and collaboration with universities. Interns contributed to improved processes and organizational development. Workplaces noted interns adapted quickly but lacked meaningful feedback. Short-term job shadowing was widely supported but seen as difficult to implement due to resource and confidentiality constraints. Students appreciated internships in their current workplaces but criticized lengthy academic reports as disconnected from experiential learning. Theoretical knowledge helped understand practical work, though searching for research articles was seen as less relevant.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the value of tourism internships conducted in students' current workplaces. For students, the main value lies in applying theoretical knowledge in practice, although the experience varies. Workplaces valued fresh perspectives, whereas universities saw internships as a bridge to industry collaboration, highlighting their transformative potential.

The interpretation of value was supported by Osterwalder's value proposition theory using an adapted version of the Willness and Bruni-Bossio (2017) model. Given the nature of internships conducted at students' current workplaces, clarification of stakeholders' roles is particularly important. Boundary-crossing theory helps to understand how students and supervisors navigate transitions between different roles, integrating theories of experiential, transformative, and integrated learning as a broader framework for understanding how learning during internships supports both individual and organizational development. The findings of this study reveal that the clarity of roles among the three stakeholders involved in the internship process varies considerably. The role of workplace supervisors has emerged as the least clear and ambiguous. Based on these findings, a question arises: in what format should workplace supervision be organized when interns are already daily employees? Nevertheless, it is crucial to clearly define and acknowledge the role of the workplace supervisor, as Capitano et al (2022) and Suan and Nasurdin (2013) emphasize that clarity in this role is important for enhancing interns' learning, engagement, confidence, and performance.

These findings raise an important discussion about the unclear roles of different stakeholders in the internship process. While students mostly see themselves as employees rather than interns, universities tend to focus on linking theory with practice through task reporting. This limits the potential of internships as a meaningful learning experience. This confusion limits the educational value of internships, as students are not fully supported as learners and workplaces are not fully engaged as co-educators. Therefore, clearer role definitions and more active reflective involvement from both universities and workplace supervisors are essential to better support student development.

From the perspective of analytical tasks, portfolios, and self-assessment, the findings indicate that they have value for learners, which aligns with Tynjälä's (2008) view that they are valuable tools for converting tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge. The value for learners is diminished only by the length of the reporting and excessive academic approaches. Self-assessment and reflection are also important from the perspective of workplace supervisors as they involve acquiring new knowledge (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011). However, workplace supervisors did not explicitly mention this in their responses, suggesting that no transformation is taking place, nor are existing practices altered in the workplace. Self-reflection could offer value to workplace supervisors, but the issue lies in the fact that supervisors do not fully recognize this, as revealed by the interviews.

There is limited structured employer engagement, which according to Maison et al (2022), can reduce the overall value proposition. Interviews also highlighted that, for students, the value of internships is diminished by the challenges associated with reporting, where an overly academic approach is expected. Therefore, more creative approaches are required. Furthermore, communication-related factors also play a role. This may stem from a lack of attention paid to the role of experience and empathy, which is supported by the findings of Taylor and Cranton (2013).

Common themes emerged from the student interviews, which Hora et al (2023) also highlighted, including factors such as autonomy, academic coordination, and quality of supervision, which are essential for understanding the relationships between internships and student development. In addition, students emphasized other key advantages of internships, such as the application of theory in real-world settings, practical skill development, career exploration, network building, and personal growth, particularly in developing soft skills, such as communication and self-confidence. However, factors such as compensation and task clarity were not mentioned, which may have been influenced by the fact that students are already everyday employees in specific enterprises.

Based on the results, it is also evident that transformative learning is lacking from the university perspective, which aligns with Boström et al (2014) finding that transformative learning is a complex process both individually and collectively. Different universities have approached internships in different ways, highlighting the opportunities for mutual learning. This suggests that universities could benefit from learning from each other's approaches to internship programs and aligning their methods to enhance the overall experience for all stakeholders. Table 2 presents targeted recommendations for universities to improve support and strengthen the internship experience.

Table 2: Recommendations for universities to enhance the value proposition based on the research findings.

Stakeholders view	Theory	Proposal to universities
Unclear supervisor roles	Role clarity improves learning and engagement (Suan and Nasurdin, 2013).	Define supervisor roles clearly in internship guidelines.
Need for self-reflection	Self-reflection transforms tacit into explicit knowledge (Tynjälä, 2008).	Simplify reports format, focus on self-reflection, offer flexible formats (e.g., project-based).
Student motivation varies	Reflection fosters coherence in learning (Roosipõld et al, 2020).	Encourage reflective feedback from both university and workplace supervisors.
Limited collaboration	Partnerships enhance programme success (Van Vechten, 2021; Zainullina and Kedrova, 2020).	Strengthen collaboration between university and workplace supervisors; involve employers in curriculum design.
Different university approaches	Common understanding builds commitment (Ruiz-Cantisani et al., 2021).	Promote inter-university collaboration and knowledge exchange.

This study demonstrates ways to increase the value of key stakeholders, providing a strong foundation for change. These recommendations are aimed at universities, providing proposals to improve support and enhance internship experience. This research also supports Dee and Leisyte (2017) claim that organizational learning is essential for sustaining change, highlighting its role in institutional transformation within higher education. When managing such changes, it is important to consider that involving key stakeholders in the process is crucial for value creation for all parties.

This research offers a new perspective on internships undertaken by students within their current workplaces, highlighting the importance of role definition in successful boundary-crossing. This also complements boundary-crossing theory. However, a limitation of this study is its focus on a specific field, which limits the generalization of the results to internships that students perform at their current workplaces. Future research should explore similar studies in other sectors to develop a more comprehensive and transferable internship value model.

Although this study focuses on tourism entrepreneurship, its findings are broadly relevant, especially for internship models where students remain in their current workplaces. The identified challenges and opportunities, including role clarity, structured mentorship, and reflective engagement, highlight factors that enhance value creation and support boundary crossing. These insights also apply to wider educational partnerships, where clear roles and supportive structures are vital. By emphasizing value creation and boundary crossing, this research can inform the design of partnerships that promote meaningful learning across diverse educational environments.

Ethical Declaration

This study involved voluntary participation. All participants were informed about the study’s purpose and gave prior consent. The research followed the principles of anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation in accordance with the University of Tartu ethics guidelines.

AI Declaration

AI tools were used only for language editing. The content and conclusions are entirely the author’s own.

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