Available online at www.ijournalse.org

Emerging Science Journal

(ISSN: 2610-9182)

Vol. 9, Special Issue, 2025

" Emerging Trends, Challenges, and Innovative Practices in Education"

Student Perspective on Employability Skills in Business Education

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Abstract

This study aims to examine how academic motivation and perceived relevance of curriculum influence career readiness and perceived employability skills among business students in Omani higher education institutions. It further investigates the mediating roles of skill development perception and learning engagement, and the moderating role of internship opportunities in these relationships. A quantitative survey-based approach was employed, collecting data from 386 business students using stratified random sampling to ensure representation across academic programs. Data were analyzed using SmartPLS-based Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), incorporating Confirmatory Factor Analysis, mediation, and moderation analyses. The findings reveal that both academic motivation and perceived curriculum relevance significantly enhance career readiness and employability skills, with skill development perception and learning engagement serving as significant mediators. Internship opportunities strengthen these effects, demonstrating their role as a key moderator. The novelty of this research lies in integrating motivational, curricular, and experiential factors within a single empirical framework for the Omani higher education context. The study contributes practical recommendations for curriculum design, teaching practices, and industry-academia collaboration, while providing policymakers with evidence-based insights to bridge the skills gap and better prepare graduates for the evolving labor market.

Keywords:

Academic Motivation;
Perceived Curriculum Relevance;
Career Readiness;
Employability Skills;
Internship Opportunities.

Article History:

Received:	20	June	2025
Revised:	01	November	2025
Accepted:	06	December	2025
Published:	18	January	2026

1- Introduction

Oman's National Education Strategy 2040 places emphasis on a world-class system of higher education closely linked to the changing labor market, stressing the cultivation of technical and soft skills required for graduate employability [1, 2]. Business education has also been recognized as a key pillar in equipping graduates to play roles in economic diversification, innovation, and entrepreneurship [3, 4]. Nonetheless, despite substantial investment in education and training, there are concerns that Omani business graduates are not adequately prepared to face the challenges of the modern job market [5]. Employers are ever more looking for transferable skills—such as critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, and flexibility—combined with technical expertise [6, 7]. However, data indicate that most graduates fail to meet these expectations, which means existing education processes are not effective in narrowing the gap between academic education and employment requirements [8, 9].

An ongoing issue within Oman's higher education system is a mismatch between university programs and the needs of the industry [10, 11]. Evidence shows that business programs commonly focus on abstract knowledge at the expense of applied learning, restricting student exposure to practical, industry-related skills [12]. The void is further entrenched by the absence of experiential learning, including internships and industry partnerships, that are imperative in developing

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DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.28991/ESJ-2025-SIED1-023

job readiness [13]. Without adequate exposure to practical business settings, graduates will not only lack technical skills but also professional networks, problem-solving skills, and flexibility—abilities critical for career success [14, 15]. This mismatch highlights the imperative to explore variables that determine career readiness, such as the influence of academic motivation, curriculum alignment, perceived skill acquisition, learning engagement, and internship experience in determining employability outcomes.

Across the world, studies have emphasized the significance of employability skills in supporting graduate competitiveness, but much of this research has taken place within Western or developed economies [16, 17]. In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, empirical research is still scarce. In Oman specifically, there have been few studies that have explored employability determinants based on the views of students—the main stakeholders in the education-to-work transition [18]. Previous research tends to concentrate narrowly on skill deficits [19] or one particular predictor, such as work-related learning [20], without incorporating psychological (motivation), curriculum (perceived relevance), and experiential (internships) elements into one model. In addition, although the mediating functions of learning engagement and skill perception have been hypothesized, they are underexamined in the context of Omani higher education. Closing this gap is vital to creating evidence-based interventions that empower graduates to gain competencies against the demands of the market.

The current research seeks to close this gap by investigating the impact of academic motivation and perceived curriculum relevance on career readiness and perceived employability skills among Omani university business students. It also examines the mediating effect of skill development perception and learning engagement, and the moderating effect of internship opportunity in enhancing these connections. Based on Self-Determination Theory [21], Human Capital Theory [7], and Experiential Learning Theory [22], this study follows a holistic conceptual framework to describe how internal motivation, curriculum alignment, and experiential exposure altogether determine employability outcomes. By utilizing a Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) method, the current study offers solid statistical proof to examine both direct and indirect relationships.

This study has several contributions. It is one of the rare empirical studies within the Omani context that incorporates motivational, curriculum, and experiential variables in a single analytical model, offering a complete picture of employability development. Second, it provides new information about the mediating processes of perception of skill development and learning participation—factors frequently neglected in studies at the regional level. Third, by examining the moderating role of internship opportunity, the research contributes to theoretical insight into how experiential learning enhances the power of motivation and curriculum congruence on employability. Lastly, the results have implications for curriculum developers, policymakers, and industry stakeholders, providing evidence-based guidance to narrow the gap between education and work.

In fulfilling these aims, this research answers calls for more context-relevant, stakeholder-focused research on graduate employability [9]. It highlights the necessity for Oman's higher education institutions to embrace competency-based curricula, enhance university–industry partnerships, and integrate work-integrated learning opportunities into business programs. The study aims to find the answers to three main questions: (1) How do perceived curriculum relevance and academic motivation impact career readiness and perceived employability skills? (2) What is the mediating effect of learning engagement and skill development perception in the relationships? (3) How do internship opportunities moderate the relationship between motivation, curriculum relevance, and employability outcomes? By offering empirical responses to these questions, this research seeks to inform policy and practice designed to prepare Omani graduates for their careers better and set them up for success in a competitive international labor market.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 discusses the literature review and the theory that forms the basis of the study. Section 3 explains the methodology of the research, data collection methods, sample procedures, and measurement tools. Section 4 discusses the findings of the data analysis, including reliability and validity tests, hypothesis testing, and moderation/mediation analysis. Section 5 presents the main conclusions against existing literature and theoretical studies. Section 6 presents the practical and theoretical contribution of the research, whereas Section 7 presents the limitations and avenues for further analysis. Section 8 provides concluding remarks.

2- Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2-1- Academic Motivation, Perceived Relevance of Curriculum, and Career Readiness

Academic motivation, the intrinsic or extrinsic motivation to pursue learning activities [21], is an essential aspect in determining students' readiness for occupational careers. Career readiness can be understood as the degree to which students have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to move into the labor market successfully [8]. Empirical findings indicate that career-motivated students tend to establish career aspirations, pursue skill enhancement opportunities proactively, and also show resilience in the resolution of academic and professional problems [23]. Brandt et al. [12] identified high academic motivation in students as being accompanied by proactive learning behaviors, which enhance problem-solving capacity and adaptability—prime indicators of career readiness. Also, a study by Ghasemy &

Elwood [24] concluded that more motivated students were more inclined to participate in internships and extracurricular activities, further increasing their employability. Based on these results, it is logical to assume that academic motivation promotes employability by inducing goal-oriented behavior, persistence, and participation in professional skill acquisition activities [25].

H1a: Academic motivation has a significant positive impact on career readiness.

Perceived curriculum relevance is the students' sense of how well their studies match actual job demands and industry requirements [19]. Career readiness, as previously discussed, entails the acquisition of skills necessary for integration into the workforce [26]. Previous studies have reiterated that students who believe their curriculum is meaningful to their future career choices are more motivated towards education, achieve higher grades, and gain skills demanded by the job market [20]. According to Xu et al. [27], a study revealed that when students feel that their curriculum is industry-standard, they create more robust professional identities and show higher confidence in their professional readiness to enter the workforce. Furthermore, evidence from research indicates that a curriculum with practical, industry-oriented elements, including work-integrated learning and project-based learning, promotes students' career-related capacities [28]. Hence, when students feel that their studies can be applied in their professional life, they will be more confident and prepared in handling job-related issues, thereby enhancing their career readiness [15].

H1b: Perceived relevance of curriculum has a significant positive impact on career readiness

2-2-Academic Motivation, Perceived Relevance of Curriculum, and Perceived Employability Skills

Perceived employability abilities are the students' self-rated capabilities that are essential for gaining and retaining employment, such as communication, problem-solving, teamwork, and flexibility [1]. Academic motivation, as initially defined, motivates students to engage in educational and extracurricular learning experiences [29]. Empirical evidence suggests that intrinsically motivated students are more likely to utilize self-directed learning, leadership activities, and gain skills through voluntary and internship-based experiences, which enhance employability [24]. This is supplemented by research work done by Abdolrezapour et al. [8], which identifies that individuals with higher academic motivation acquire soft and technical skills in proactive ways, generating enhanced employability perceptions. Likewise, research conducted by Soproni [30] concluded that motivation encourages ongoing skill development, building students' confidence in performing the demands of the job market. In light of these conclusions, it is predicted that academically motivated individuals actively develop their employability skills by taking part in skill-building activities and by adopting a proactive career approach [16].

H2a: Academic motivation has a significant positive impact on perceived employability skills

Perceived relevance of curriculum refers to how students personally evaluate and interpret the extent to which their academic curriculum aligns with real-world industry needs, career requirements, and practical job-market expectations. Perceived curriculum relevance plays a pivotal role in enhancing employability skills by ensuring that students feel the education they are receiving is preparing them effectively for the demands of the modern workplace. It shapes their attitudes, learning behaviors, and confidence in entering the job market. Perceived curriculum relevance impacts the way students assess their readiness for the job. It affects their learning and development of skills [14]. The employability skills mentioned above incorporate a set of capabilities required for successful employment. It has been found that students who perceive the relevance of their coursework to their professional objectives develop a more robust skillset as they can relate theoretical concepts to practical uses [16]. Empirical research, including that of [31], indicates that relevance in the curriculum improves skill acquisition, especially problem-solving, critical thinking, and communication—primary qualities employers are looking for. A study by Liu [32] also revealed that students who felt their curriculum was industry-relevant had higher confidence levels in their employability since they felt their education had sufficiently prepared them for tasks in the workplace. As a result, when students perceive the immediate applicability of their studies to working life, they are more likely to identify their employability skills, strengthening the positive effect of curriculum relevance on perceived employability skills [27].

H2b: Perceived relevance of curriculum has a significant positive impact on perceived employability skills.

2-3-Skill Development Perception as a Mediator

The relationship between academic motivation and career readiness is explained by Self-Determination Theory, which suggests that intrinsically motivated individuals actively engage in growth-oriented activities [21]. In education, this motivation drives students to pursue meaningful learning, enhancing their perception of skill development. This self-assessed skill growth serves as a cognitive link between motivation and career preparedness, ultimately shaping their readiness for employment. Past studies have proven that students' perception of skill development is greatly affected by academic motivation, which in turn promotes career readiness. Academic motivation is either intrinsic (internal) or extrinsic (goal-oriented), and both inspire students to actively pursue opportunities to acquire essential skills for the labor market [21]. Empirical evidence has established that highly motivated learners engage in the development of their abilities through activities like workshops, internships, and independent study, eventually improving their

perceptions of skill competence [30]. Additionally, research shows that career preparedness is intimately associated with students' feelings about developing skills, since those who are convinced that they have developed necessary competencies are more confident of being able to join the workforce successfully [18]. With these empirical results in hand, one could say that academic motivation facilitates students' beliefs in their skill acquisition, thereby making them stronger in terms of career preparedness by endowing them with the competencies needed to enter the professional arena [19].

H3a: Skill development perception mediates the relationship between academic motivation and career readiness.

Constructivist learning emphasizes that students build knowledge through engagement with real-world content. When curricula align with practical contexts, it boosts cognitive engagement and skill development. Such relevance enhances students' motivation and perception of employability. The degree to which students feel their curriculum is relevant has a significant impact on their belief in developing their skills, which in turn impacts their readiness for the workplace. Past research indicates that an industry-matched curriculum leads students to build applicable skills, further enhancing their confidence in being work-ready [20]. Empirical studies have revealed that if students perceive their courses as relevant to actual circumstances, they participate more actively in learning activities that allow them to gain technical and soft skills [17]. Research further establishes that skill development perception remains a vital career readiness predictor because students who appreciate their advancements toward gaining functional competencies tend to be ready to enter the workplace [15]. According to these results, perceived curriculum relevance is predicted to enhance students' belief in their skill development, and that, subsequently, will boost their overall career readiness by offering them a concrete sense of readiness for professional challenges [33].

H3b: Skill development perception mediates the relationship between perceived relevance of curriculum and career readiness.

When academic curricula align with labor market needs, students perceive greater relevance and support for developing job-ready skills. According to Self-Determination Theory and Person-Environment Fit Theory, this alignment enhances psychological needs like competence and autonomy, which boosts employability-belief. Social Cognitive Theory further suggests that such internal evaluations shape students' broader perception of career readiness. Previous studies have strongly associated academic motivation with students engaging in activities of skill improvement that boost employability perceptions. Empirical research points out that motivated students purposefully pursue knowledge acquisition, skill improvement, and career-related experience that enhance their employability [3]. El-Sakran [13] showed that highly academically motivated individuals pursue ongoing skill development, which increases their confidence in acquiring marketable skills. Research also indicates that students' perceptions of their competence building are a significant factor in determining their employability beliefs, since those who feel they have developed key competencies are likely to perceive themselves as job-ready [9]. Based on these findings, it is anticipated that academic motivation boosts students' perceptions of skill development, which, in turn, enhances their perceived employability skills by affirming their confidence in their ability to address job market needs.

H4a: Skill development perception mediates the relationship between academic motivation and perceived employability skills.

According to Constructivist Learning Theory, students engage more deeply when content feels meaningful and applicable. Perceived curriculum relevance enhances cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement, supporting the internalization of career-ready skills. Self-Determination Theory adds that such relevance fulfills psychological needs for autonomy and competence, boosting intrinsic motivation and deeper learning for workforce preparedness. Perceived curriculum applicability has long been recognized as one of the determining variables of students' belief in their employability. Evidence from empirical studies reveals that students who perceive their courses as relevant and practically applicable in the workplace are confident that they have the required competencies for employment [16]. There is evidence to show that when students understand that their study program matches the demands of the job market, they actively participate in learning activities that develop essential employability skills like critical thinking, problem-solving, and teamwork [31]. Furthermore, research has shown that individuals' personal belief in their learning capabilities significantly contributes to their general confidence in being employable, as people who feel they possess the necessary skills are more ready to explore the job market [34]. According to these results, it is anticipated that students' attitude towards curriculum relevance improves students' attitudes towards building their skills, which supports students' perceived employability skills through confirming students' belief of being able to fulfill industry demands.

H4b: Skill development perception mediates the relationship between perceived relevance of curriculum and perceived employability skills.

2-4- Learning Engagement as Mediator

When students perceive academic content as aligned with real-world job demands, their engagement increases cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally. Experiential and social constructivist approaches enhance this by situating learning in real-life contexts. At the same time, Social Cognitive Theory explains how this engagement builds self-

efficacy and perceived employability through mastery experiences. Empirical research has repeatedly established that academic motivation is a key determinant of the level of students' participation in learning activities. Motivation, and specifically intrinsic motivation, leads to deep learning strategies, which stimulate students' active participation in coursework, problem-solving tasks, and real-world application of knowledge [21]. Research indicates that learning engagement, or the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement in learning, is essential to career readiness by facilitating students' acquisition and use of job skills [28]. Empirical research shows that students who are significantly engaged in learning build stronger skills, which manifest as greater preparedness for career positions [15]. Based on these findings, it is anticipated that students' academic motivation increases learning engagement, and learning engagement, in turn, has a positive influence on career readiness by providing students with adequate knowledge, skills, and attitudes to excel in the workplace.

H5a: Learning engagement mediates the relationship between academic motivation and career readiness.

The extent to which students feel that their curriculum is relevant has a direct impact on their levels of engagement, which in turn impacts their readiness for careers [14]. Empirical research shows that students who feel that their studies are meaningful and relevant to actual work situations have higher levels of engagement since they are aware of the immediate payoffs of learning [8]. Bhatti et al. [5] indicated that relevance in the curriculum promotes active engagement in learning activities, resulting in enhanced skill acquisition and employability. Also, it has been established in studies that active learners tend to acquire the critical employability skills of adaptability, problem-solving ability, and resilience [13]. From these results, one can anticipate that perceived relevance of the curriculum improves learning engagement, which will further reinforce career readiness through more substantive learning and development of skills [20].

H5b: Learning engagement mediates the relationship between perceived relevance of curriculum and career readiness.

Previous research has identified that student motivation is pivotal in determining levels of engagement by students, ultimately influencing their perception of employability. Empirical studies indicate that engaged students will participate more frequently in knowledge-generation processes, internship activities, and extracurricular activities for enhancing skills [1]. Research has shown that engagement in learning contributes to developing crucial employability skills like thinking critically, collaborating with others, and communicating [30]. Moreover, research ascertains that learners who have a high degree of engagement with learning activities say they feel confident that they could find and succeed at jobs [18]. Based on these empirical results, academic motivation is expected to increase engagement in learning, which in turn increases perceived employability skills through active involvement in skill development activities.

H6a: Learning engagement mediates the relationship between academic motivation and perceived employability skills.

The link between perceived curriculum relevance and employability skills is heavily determined by students' levels of learning engagement [34]. Empirical research shows that if students perceive their coursework as being relevant to actual professional environments, they tend to be highly engaged in learning activities, which translates to better skill acquisition [26]. It has been supported by Allam et al. [19], which indicates that curriculum significance fosters an active learning spirit, enabling students to develop abilities directly beneficial for employability. Studies also reaffirm that student engagement leads to increased adaptability, leadership skills, and problem-solving ability, which are the principal employer desired skills [12]. Based on these empirical findings, perceived curriculum relevance is anticipated to promote learning engagement, which in turn reinforces perceived employability skills through increased competency building and job market readiness [5].

H6b: Learning engagement mediates the relationship between perceived relevance of curriculum and perceived employability skills.

2-5- Internship Opportunities as Moderator

Skill development perception mediates the relationship between both academic motivation and perceived curriculum relevance with career readiness. Theoretically, motivated students engage more deeply in learning, viewing it as a chance to build valuable skills, while a relevant curriculum enhances engagement by making learning feel purposeful [35]. Self-determination theory suggests that intrinsic motivation promotes skill acquisition, and cognitive load theory highlights that meaningful content improves learning efficiency. Empirical studies support that academic motivation and curriculum relevance both foster stronger perceptions of skill development, which in turn enhance students' sense of career readiness. Empirical evidence identifies academic motivation and perceived curriculum relevance as the essential determinants of career preparedness, with internship experiences further bridging these connections [12]. Research indicates that motivated students proactively pursue experiential learning experiences like internships to support theoretical learning with practical experience, thus enhancing career preparedness [3]. In the same way, where students see their curriculum as aligned with industry needs, they tend to participate more in learning opportunities that enhance their professional capability [36]. Internships act as an essential moderator by giving students experiential learning, access to workplace interaction, and exposure to develop vital employability skills [5]. Research also shows that students who participate in internships develop practical knowledge of their desired professions, enabling them to convert their

academic drive and curriculum knowledge into concrete career readiness measures [35]. As a result, internship experience should be anticipated to augment the favorable influence of academic motivation and curriculum alignment on employability, as students who are exposed to practice are more capable of making a successful transition from education to employment with confidence and capability [15].

H7a: Internship opportunities moderate the relationship between academic motivation and career readiness, such that the relationship is stronger when internship opportunities are high.

H7b: Internship opportunities moderate the relationship between perceived relevance of curriculum and career readiness, such that the relationship is stronger when internship opportunities are high.

Learning engagement mediates the relationship between both academic motivation and perceived curriculum relevance with career readiness. Theoretically, motivated students and those who find the curriculum relevant are more engaged in learning, which promotes the development of competencies essential for career success. Flow theory emphasizes that intrinsic motivation enhances deep engagement, while expectancy-value theory highlights that perceived value boosts effort and participation. Empirical evidence shows that academic motivation and curriculum relevance positively impact engagement, which in turn enhances career readiness. Extensive studies have established that motivational education and perceived curriculum relevance are significant determiners of students' beliefs in employability skills, and access to internships as a relevant salient factor for enhancing such impacts [8]. Motivated students tend to be willing to acquire professional growth opportunities, such as internships, which will help them add to their set of skills and workability and, in so doing, gain more confidence in their employability [1]. In the same way, students who are aware that their curriculum aligns with the requirements of real-world jobs are more inclined to acquire industry-based skills, a process facilitated further by hands-on experience gained in internships [3]. Empirical evidence confirms that internships provide students with valuable competencies such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, all of which are essential for job success [36]. In addition, research shows that students who go through internships believe that they are more employable because internships reinforce their academic training and widen their professional networks [20]. It is predicted on the grounds of these findings that internship experience serves as a mediator in bridging academic motivation, curriculum applicability, and employability skills by creating the experiential learning environment whereby learners are empowered to apply their knowledge and enthusiasm into workforce preparation and thereby improve their labor market competitiveness [11].

H8a: Internship opportunities moderate the relationship between academic motivation and perceived employability skills, such that the relationship is stronger when internship opportunities are high.

H8b: Internship opportunities moderate the relationship between perceived relevance of curriculum and perceived employability skills, such that the relationship is stronger when internship opportunities are high.

3- Theoretical Framework Supporting Research

The current research is based on four interrelated theoretical frameworks: Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Human Capital Theory (HCT), Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), and Experiential Learning Theory (ELT). Collectively, these theories account for how individual motivation, perceived relevance of the curriculum, and experiential learning interact to influence career preparedness and employability skills. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) assumes that human motivation results from the satisfaction of three fundamental psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness [21]. In the academic environment, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation affect students' persistence, engagement, and seeking skill development. In this research, SDT guides the hypothesis that academic motivation directly increases career readiness and perceived employability skills and indirectly influences them through skill development perception and learning engagement. Students with high intrinsic motivation tend to be more engaged in skill-building and experiential learning activities.

Human Capital Theory (HCT) [7] posits that training and education are investments that increase the productivity and economic worth of people. Perceived curriculum relevance is the measure of how students determine how closely their studies match industry requirements, influencing how willing they are to spend effort and time acquiring work-relevant competencies. HCT corroborates the hypothesis that industry-oriented curricula enhance the worth of graduates in the job market, hence enhancing their career preparedness and employability competence. Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) [37] emphasizes the position of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals in career growth. Skill development, perception, and learning engagement in this research are interpreted under SCCT as factors that move motivation and relevance of curriculum to employability outcomes. Students who believe they can learn relevant skills are more engaged in career-preparatory behaviors and see themselves as job-ready.

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) [22] outlines how knowledge is developed as a result of transforming experience. Internship provision actualizes this notion by offering real-world settings for students to practice academic learning, gain feedback, and refine competence. ELT underpins the moderating effect of internships in enhancing the influence of motivation and curriculum value on employability outcomes by filling the gap between theoretical and

practical know-how in the workplace. By incorporating SDT, HCT, SCCT, and ELT, this paper suggests a comprehensive model where academic motivation and perceived curriculum relevance are fundamental drivers of employability, perception of skill development and learning engagement are internal cognitive-behavioral mechanisms, and internship opportunities are an external experiential enhancer. This multi-theory framework (Figure 1) ensures that the study is grounded both in psychological processes at the individual level and in structural, market-oriented frameworks, providing an integrated explanation of how graduate employability can be enhanced through higher education.

4- Research Methodology

The study employed a quantitative research method, utilizing a survey-based approach to investigate the interdependencies between academic motivation, perceived curriculum relevance, skill development perception, learning engagement, internship opportunities, career preparation, and perceived employability skills. Primary data were obtained using a structured questionnaire from students studying business at Omani universities. The quantitative method was chosen because it can yield objective, measurable, and generalizable information about the study variables, which can be analyzed statistically and tested for hypotheses. The research employed a cross-sectional design, where data were gathered at one point in time to examine the cause-and-effect relationships between the variables. Since the study aimed at testing relationships and testing mediation and moderation effects, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) based on SmartPLS was used for statistical analysis. This method allowed assessment of complicated relationships between latent constructs while controlling measurement error, making the method appropriate for use in this research.

The study population of this research consisted of business students pursuing higher education in Oman because they are the future professionals entering the labor market and experiencing challenges related to career readiness and employability. The stratified random sampling method was applied to get a representative sample from various universities based on variations in academic programs and student populations. The sample was stratified according to variables of university affiliation, year of study, and business education specialization. Following statistical recommendations for SEM-based studies, a minimum of 200–300 respondents was used to obtain valid and generalizable results [38]. Yet to increase robustness and minimize potential non-response bias, 386 usable responses were gathered and processed. This sample size was above the minimum required for SmartPLS-based SEM analysis, providing sufficient statistical power to identify relationships between the study variables.

The questionnaire used in this study comprised multiple constructs measured using established scales from previous literature. Academic motivation was assessed with five items adapted from [2], while perceived relevance of curriculum was measured using five items from [22]. Career readiness was captured through 4 items based on the work of [11]. Perceived employability skills were evaluated using five items developed by Saunders & Zuzel [39]. Skill development perception consisted of 7 items sourced from [4]. Learning engagement was measured with eight items from [40], and internship opportunities were assessed using five items adapted from [41]. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was undertaken to confirm the measurement model and close the questionnaire. This ensured that every scale used in the research was equivalent to the theoretical constructs it aimed to measure, thereby validating the convergent and discriminant validity of the constructs. Once the CFA was done, the constructs were retained, and measurement items were established for their reliability. The final questionnaire version contained validated items that matched the variables in the model, and this was utilized to collect data for hypothesis testing. To lower the likelihood of standard method bias (CMB) inherent in self-report surveys, several procedural controls were used. Respondents were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality to minimize evaluation apprehension. Independent, mediating, and dependent variable items were spread throughout the questionnaire to minimize pattern-based responses. Question wording was kept straightforward and simple to lower ambiguity. Moreover, Harman's single-factor test was also carried out, and it revealed that no factor was greater than 40% in explaining the variance, which meant that CMB did not pose a serious threat to the validity of the findings.

Data analysis was carried out with the help of SmartPLS, a variance-based Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) method that enables the estimation of measurement and structural models simultaneously. The analysis was carried out in a multi-step manner. Descriptive analysis was carried out to present the demographic profile of the respondents and give an overview of the dataset. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was carried out to establish the measurement model validity, ensuring construct reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. The structural model was later evaluated with the help of SEM to determine the direct, indirect, and interaction effects between variables, offering feedback on hypothesized relationships. Bootstrapping approaches were used in mediation analysis to investigate the mediating roles of skill development, perception, and learning involvement. In contrast, moderation analysis was applied to determine the interaction effects of internship opportunities on interactions between independent and dependent variables. Lastly, hypothesis testing was done through path coefficients, t-values, and p-values to identify the significance of hypothesized relationships in the research model.

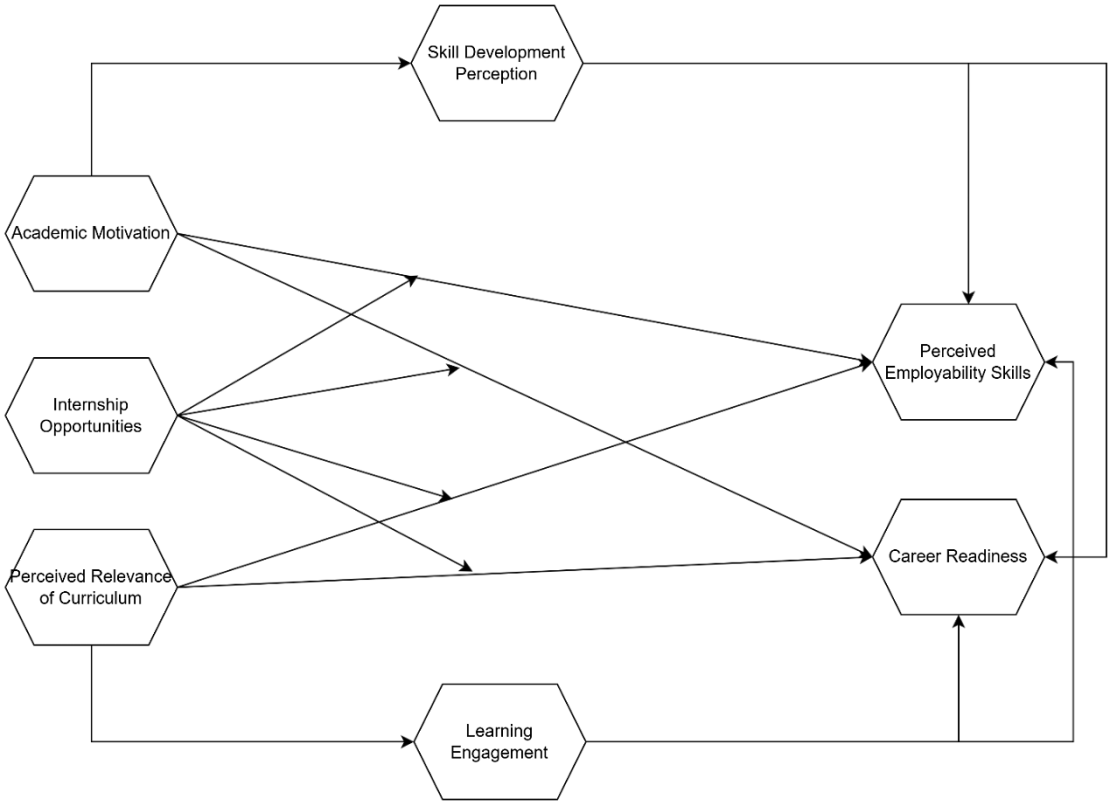

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

5- Results

Table 1 summarizes demographic data of the 510 study participants. Based on age, most of the participants were 28 and above (48.2%), followed by 18–22 years (40.1%), and 23–27 years (11.7%). Female respondents exceeded males slightly and comprised 54.1% of the sample, while 45.9% were male. According to academic qualifications, the majority of the respondents (59.8%) held a bachelor's degree, and the rest included diploma holders (27.2%), master's graduates (10.9%), and PhD holders (2.1%). The major fields of study included mainly business administration (43%), accounting and finance (26.9%), and a lesser proportion in marketing, HRM, economics, and other fields. Private colleges/universities contributed the most significant number (53.4%) of respondents, followed by public universities (35.5%) and technical/applied sciences colleges (11.1%). Interestingly, 63.5% of students had already done an internship, and 61.1% had part-time or full-time work experience. Career goals were divided between entrepreneurship (26.2%), public service employment (25.6%), private sector (24.3%), and postgraduate education (13.5%). Regarding confidence in employability, 47.2% reported feeling very confident and 47.4% somewhat confident. Students listed communication (32.9%) and critical thinking (25.6%) as their most developed skills, and these were also named as the most in need of development, followed by communication and digital literacy. Most respondents considered employability training offered by their university to be effective (47.4% considered it very effective). Attendance at career development activities like soft skills training, career guidance, and job fairs was also recorded. Key areas for university development were closer industry links (19.4%) and additional career-focused workshops (21.5%).

Table 2 and Figure 2 display an overview of reliability and validity statistics of constructs utilized in the research. Outer loadings of measurement items over various variables are found to indicate appropriate levels of construct validity, as all the figures are greater than the cutoff level of 0.5. The values for Cronbach's alpha, measuring internal consistency, are 0.792–0.905 across various constructs and reflect high reliability. As examples, Academic Motivation (AM) was 0.872, and Career Readiness (CR) was 0.792. The Composite Reliability (CR) coefficients, between 0.814 and 0.925, also validate the constructs' reliability. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values, which test convergent validity, are between 0.531 (for Career Readiness) and 0.669 (for Academic Motivation), showing sufficient validity. All these statistics attest that the study's measurement scales are reliable as well as valid. The Learning Engagement (LE) construct maintained a lower value of AVE (0.582), although still within suitable limits for measuring validity in behavior research. The scales utilised in the current study hold strong reliability as well as validity, validating the strength of results on these constructs.

Table 3 shows the outcome of the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations, which is an indicator used to estimate discriminant validity. The HTMT values shown in this table explain that the constructs are clearly different from each other. For instance, the HTMT value between Academic Motivation (AM) and Career Readiness (CR) is 0.794, which is less than the universally accepted 0.85 threshold, substantiating the fact that these constructs are different. The greatest HTMT values are between Internship Opportunities (IO) and Career Readiness (0.693), and

between Internship Opportunities and Perceived Employability Skills (0.878), indicating a high relationship yet still within the parameters that provide discriminant validity. The correlations between Skill Development Perception (SDP) and other variables, including Learning Engagement (0.837) and Career Readiness (0.719), also show that although these variables are related, they are still distinct in conceptualization. The HTMT results serve as evidence that the constructs employed in this research do not replicate to an excessive degree, attesting to the validity of the measurement model and warranting the following path analysis.

Table 4 shows the R-square values for the study's dependent constructs, which reflect the explanatory power of the model. The R-square value for Career Readiness is 0.631, which implies that the model explains 63.1% of the variance in this construct, reflecting a moderate to strong explanatory power. Perceived Employability Skills (PES) also has a comparatively high R-square of 0.687, which means that the model explains 68.7% of the variance in perceived employability skills. Learning Engagement has an R-square value of 0.327, meaning that the model explains approximately 32.7% of the variance in this construct, which is moderate but lower than Career Readiness and PES. Skill Development Perception, with an R-square of 0.274, indicates that the model explains 27.4% of the variance, which is less than the other variables but does provide some information regarding the determinants of skill development perception. The Adjusted R-square values validate these findings, with marginally lower values reflecting the robustness of the model after considering the number of predictors. The goodness of fit of the model is also reflected in the Q2 value for Career Readiness (0.594), which is higher than the threshold of 0.35, showing predictive relevance. Also, the SRMR value of 0.072 shows a good fit since values less than 0.08 are generally acceptable.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age Group	18–22	155	40.1
	23–27	45	11.7
	28+	186	48.2
Gender	Female	209	54.1
	Male	177	45.9
Academic Background	Bachelor's degree	231	59.8
	Diploma degree	105	27.2
	Master's degree	42	10.9
	PhD	8	2.1
Major/Field of Study	Business Administration	166	43
	Accounting & Finance	104	26.9
	Marketing	21	5.4
	Human Resource Management	27	7
	Economics	9	2.3
	Other (please specify)	59	15.3
Institution Type	College of Technical/Applied Sciences	43	11.1
	Private University/College	206	53.4
	public university	137	35.5
Completed an internship or work placement	No	141	36.5
	Yes	245	63.5
Part-time or full-time job	No	150	38.8
	Yes, full time	170	44.0
	Yes, part-time	66	17.1
Career goal after graduation	Public sector employment	99	25.6
	Entrepreneurship/Starting my own business	101	26.2
	Private sector employment	94	24.3
	Pursuing higher education (Master's/PhD)	52	13.5
	undefined	40	10.4
How confident are you in your employability skills?	Very confident	182	47.2
	Somewhat confident	183	47.4
	Not very confident	17	4.4
	Not confident at all	4	1
Which employability skills do you feel strongest in	Communication skills	384	32.9
	Critical thinking & problem-solving	298	25.6
	Teamwork & collaboration	173	14.8
	Leadership skills	132	11.3
	Digital literacy & technical skills	97	8.3
	Time management	48	4.1
	Adaptability & resilience	34	2.9

Which skills do you feel need further development?	Communication skills	193	30.1
	Critical thinking & problem-solving	143	22.3
	Teamwork & collaboration	69	10.8
	Leadership skills	98	15.3
	Digital literacy & technical skills	111	17.3
	Time management	65	10.1
	Adaptability & resilience	60	9.4
Do you believe your university provides sufficient employability skills training?	Yes, very effective	183	47.4
	Somewhat effective	100	25.9
	Neutral	62	16.1
	Not very effective	30	7.8
	Not effective at all	11	2.8
Which career development activities have you participated in?	Soft skills training workshops	164	0.4
	Career counseling sessions	128	0.3
	Job fairs & networking events	123	0.3
	Entrepreneurship programs	69	0.2
	Internships/work placements	103	0.3
How can your university improve employability skills development?	More internship opportunities	1	0.3
	Stronger industry connections	75	19.4
	More career-related workshops	83	21.5
	Improved academic curriculum alignment with industry needs	66	17.1
	Other	3	0.8

Table 2. Constructs Reliability and Validity

Variables	Items	Outer Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Academic Motivation	AM1	0.865	0.872	0.909	0.669
	AM2	0.851			
	AM3	0.886			
	AM4	0.810			
	AM5	0.655			
Career Readiness	CR1	0.823	0.792	0.814	0.531
	CR2	0.765			
	CR3	0.785			
	CR4	0.495			
Internship Opportunities	IO1	0.835	0.874	0.908	0.664
	IO2	0.811			
	IO3	0.826			
	IO4	0.815			
	IO5	0.785			
Learning Engagement	LE1	0.703	0.894	0.916	0.582
	LE2	0.743			
	LE3	0.798			
	LE4	0.815			
	LE5	0.823			
	LE6	0.542			
	LE7	0.822			
	LE8	0.811			
Perceived Employability Skills	PES1	0.737	0.843	0.888	0.614
	PES2	0.652			
	PES3	0.833			
	PES4	0.838			
	PES5	0.841			
Perceived Relevance of Curriculum	PRC1	0.771	0.864	0.901	0.645
	PRC2	0.779			
	PRC3	0.826			
	PRC4	0.808			
	PRC5	0.828			

	SDP1	0.800	0.905	0.925	0.638
	SDP2	0.725			
	SDP3	0.737			
Skill Development Perception	SDP4	0.811			
	SDP5	0.837			
	SDP6	0.866			
	SDP7	0.805			

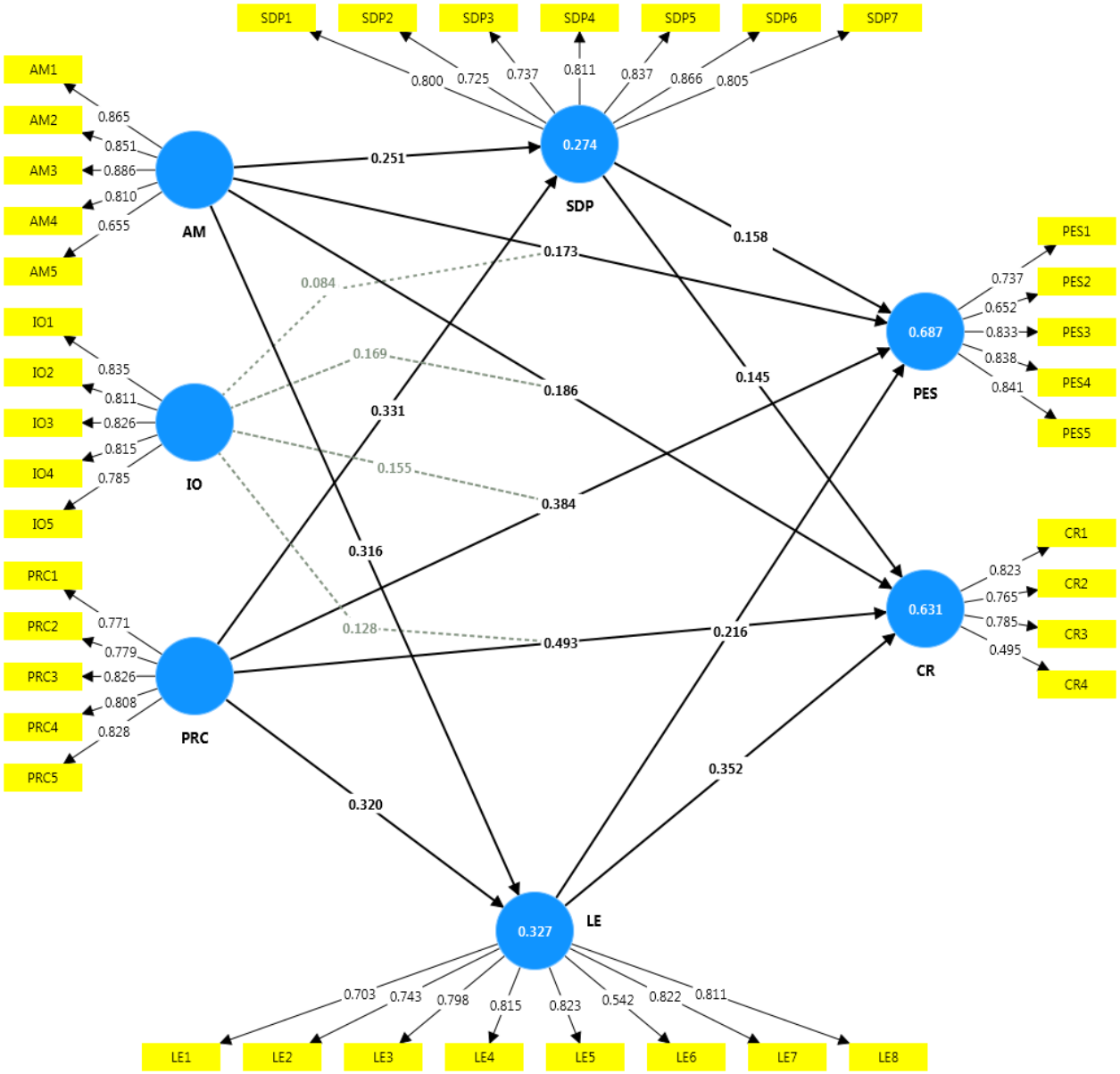

Figure 2. Estimated Model

Table 3. Discriminant Validity (HTMT)

	AM	CR	IO	LE	PES	PRC	SDP
Academic Motivation							
Career Readiness	0.794						
Internship Opportunities	0.453	0.693					
Learning Engagement	0.568	0.731	0.727				
Perceived Employability Skills	0.592	0.841	0.878	0.783			
Perceived Relevance of Curriculum	0.706	0.887	0.528	0.575	0.507		
Skill Development Perception	0.503	0.719	0.801	0.837	0.766	0.542	

Table 4. R-square statistics Model Goodness of Fit Statistics

	R-square	R-square adjusted	Q2	SRMR
Career Readiness	0.631	0.624	0.594	0.072
Learning Engagement	0.327	0.324	0.309	
Perceived Employability Skills	0.687	0.681	0.625	
Skill Development Perception	0.274	0.271	0.258	

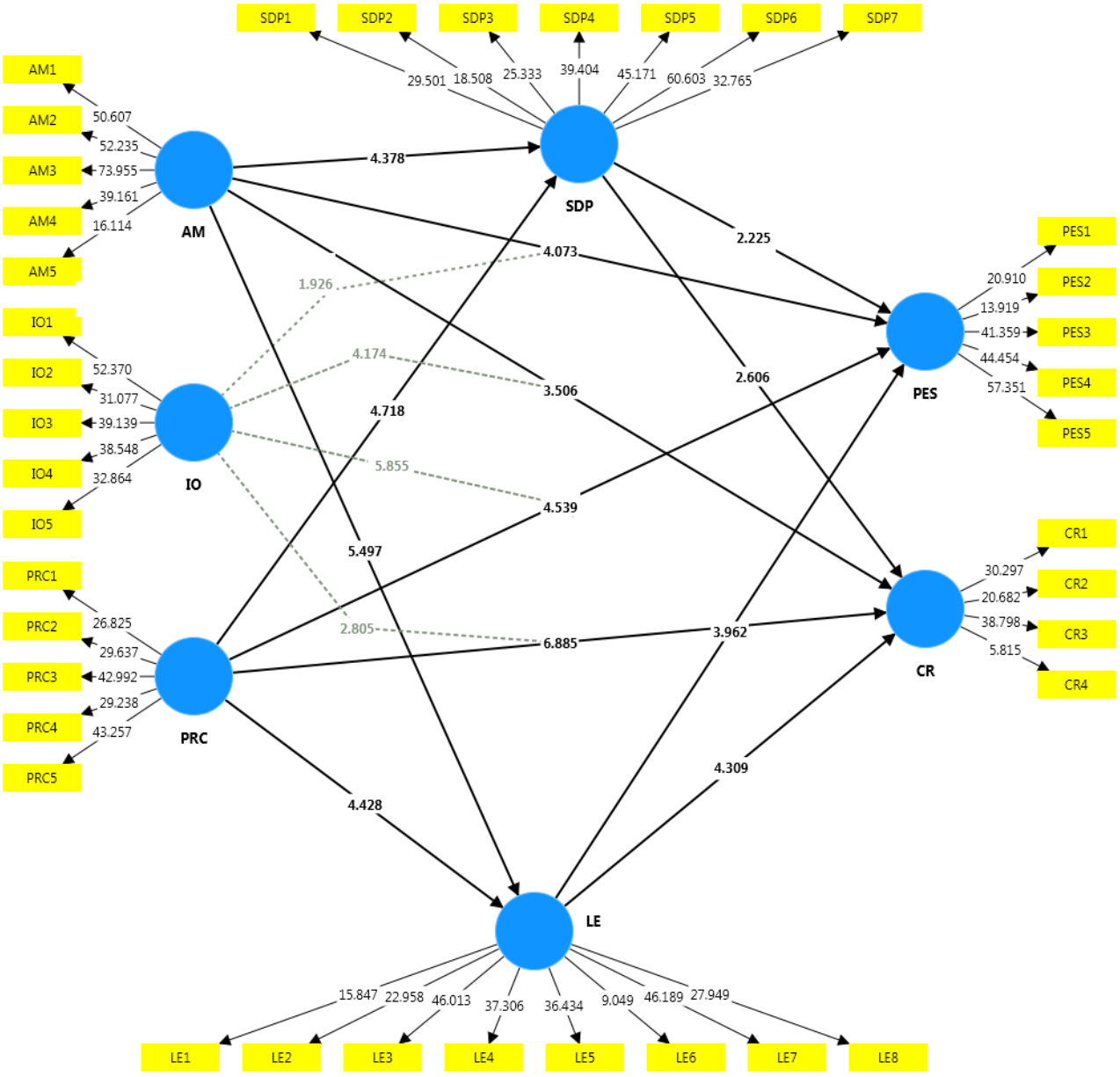

Figure 3. Structural Model for Path Analysis

Table 5 and Figure 3 results indicate that academic motivation also has a strong positive influence on career readiness ($\beta = 0.186$, $t = 3.506$, $p < 0.001$), thereby supporting H1a. This finding suggests that motivated students are more likely to take proactive steps, such as pursuing internships, practicing skills, and networking, which in turn enhances their job market readiness. This result is in line with previous research by Acut et al. [10], who established that intrinsic motivation is what propels active participation in employability activities. Likewise, it matches the findings of Jordan & Matzke [36], who demonstrated that motivated students exhibit greater adaptability and problem-solving abilities, essential components of career readiness. Perceived curriculum relevance also has a substantial impact on career preparedness ($\beta = 0.493$, $t = 6.885$, $p < 0.001$), affirming H1b. This suggests that students who perceive their coursework as relevant to industry needs are more self-assured and prepared for the workforce. These findings are consonant with [42], who found that industry-specific curricula enhance graduates' self-perceived job readiness, and support Human Capital Theory's assumption that similar education enhances labor market worth.

The findings also reveal that academic motivation has a positive and significant impact on perceived employability skills ($\beta = 0.173$, $t = 4.073$, $p < 0.001$), thereby confirming H2a. In contrast, perceived relevance of curriculum has a more substantial positive impact ($\beta = 0.384$, $t = 5.539$, $p < 0.001$), confirming H2b. This postulates that both internal drive and alignment of the curriculum have significant roles in influencing students' beliefs in employability competencies. The more impactful effect size on curriculum relevance is consistent with [31], which established that application-based, practical curricula are better predictors of employability perceptions than factors for motivation only. For the mediating effects, the perception of skill development strongly mediates the links between academic motivation and career readiness ($\beta = 0.036$, $p < 0.05$) and perceived curriculum relevance and career readiness ($\beta = 0.048$, $p < 0.05$), verifying H3a and H3b. This points to the students' self-reported skill acquisition as a cognitive process converting motivation and curriculum quality into employability readiness. This is consistent with [30], who posited that self-assessment of skill development enhances employability confidence, and [33], who demonstrated that perceived competence was a good predictor of career readiness. Likewise, skill development perception mediates the relationships between academic motivation and perceived employability skills ($\beta = 0.041$, $p < 0.05$) and curriculum relevance and perceived employability skills ($\beta = 0.044$, $p < 0.05$), favoring H4a and H4b. This suggests that developing one's own skill sets not only increases readiness but also fosters a strong belief in employability. This is consistent with Social Cognitive Career Theory, which stresses the value of self-efficacy in informing career beliefs [37].

The learning engagement mediator further exhibits considerable effects. It mediates academic motivation and career readiness ($\beta = 0.062$, $p < 0.01$) and curriculum relevance and career readiness ($\beta = 0.058$, $p < 0.01$), confirming H5a and H5b. Furthermore, it also mediates the link between academic motivation and perceived employability skills ($\beta = 0.068$, $p < 0.01$) and that of curriculum relevance and perceived employability skills ($\beta = 0.069$, $p < 0.01$), in favor of H6a and H6b. These findings reinforce that active engagement in learning activities is an essential behavioral pathway by which both motivation and curriculum quality yield employability outcomes. This is by Fletcher & Tan [28], who discovered that participation in experiential and collaborative learning strongly predicts the development of skills and employability confidence. Lastly, internship opportunities strongly moderate some of the relationships. They intensify the connection between academic motivation and career readiness ($\beta = 0.169$, $p < 0.001$) and that between curriculum relevance and career readiness ($\beta = 0.128$, $p < 0.01$), corroborating H7a and H7b. They also strengthen the links between academic motivation and perceived employability skills ($\beta = 0.084$, $p < 0.05$) and between curriculum relevance and perceived employability skills ($\beta = 0.155$, $p < 0.001$), affirming H8a and H8b. These results are consistent with [12], who noted that internships serve as pivotal enhancers of academic–workplace connections, and with [20], which demonstrated that industry-experienced students reported a significantly higher sense of confidence in their ability and preparedness for employment.

Table 5. Path Analysis

Hypothesis	β	t values	p values
Academic motivation has a significant positive impact on career readiness.	0.186	3.506	0.000
Perceived relevance of curriculum has a significant positive impact on career readiness.	0.493	6.885	0.000
Academic motivation has a significant positive impact on perceived employability skills.	0.173	4.073	0.000
Perceived relevance of curriculum has a significant positive impact on perceived employability skills.	0.384	0.539	0.000
Skill development perception mediates the relationship between academic motivation and career readiness.	0.036	2.241	0.013
Skill development perception mediates the relationship between perceived relevance of curriculum and career readiness.	0.048	2.119	0.017
Skill development perception mediates the relationship between academic motivation and perceived employability skills.	0.041	2.314	0.011
Skill development perception mediates the relationship between perceived relevance of curriculum and perceived employability skills.	0.044	2.186	0.015
Learning engagement mediates the relationship between academic motivation and career readiness.	0.062	3.051	0.002
Learning engagement mediates the relationship between perceived relevance of curriculum and career readiness.	0.058	2.844	0.004
Learning engagement mediates the relationship between academic motivation and perceived employability skills.	0.068	3.219	0.001
Learning engagement mediates the relationship between perceived relevance of curriculum and perceived employability skills.	0.069	2.798	0.003
Internship opportunities moderate the relationship between academic motivation and career readiness, such that the relationship is stronger when internship opportunities are high.	0.169	4.174	0.000
Internship opportunities moderate the relationship between perceived relevance of curriculum and career readiness, such that the relationship is stronger when internship opportunities are high.	0.128	2.805	0.003
Internship opportunities moderate the relationship between academic motivation and perceived employability skills, such that the relationship is stronger when internship opportunities are high.	0.084	1.962	0.045
Internship opportunities moderate the relationship between perceived relevance of curriculum and perceived employability skills, such that the relationship is stronger when internship opportunities are high.	0.155	5.855	0.000

6- Discussion

The transition from academia to the job market is a pivotal stage in students' professional lives, and understanding the determinants of employability skills and career readiness is essential both in academia and in business. In this research, the complex correlation between academic motivation, perceived relevance of the curriculum, perceived curriculum skill development, learning engagement, and internship environments in shaping opinions regarding career readiness and employability is investigated. The results support that these variables have significant interactions, with both direct and indirect effects on the transition of students to professional life from university. The mediating role of skill development, perception, and learning engagement underscores the significance of students' ability to appropriate and engage in their own learning experience. In contrast, the moderating role of internship opportunity highlights the pivotal role of experiential exposure in bridging the gap between theoretical preparation and work expectations. These findings add to the impetus of current debates around education policy and the development of the curriculum and take the thesis further for a more holistic model of higher education that integrates motivational, experiential, and institution-based support variables in ensuring improved employability outcomes for students.

The empirical findings validate that academic motivation has a direct effect on career readiness (H1a) and perceived curriculum relevance as a significant factor in the work readiness of students (H1b). The empirical findings are in support of the Self-Determination Theory [21], which assumes that higher levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in students render them wholly engaged in activities encouraging professional development. The positive effect of academic motivation on career readiness is that learners who demonstrate more eagerness, commitment, and persistence toward achieving their studies are best prepared with the skills and confidence to enter the work environment successfully. This is consistent with existing studies that have shown that career-oriented students will tend to be active in acquiring employability skills, independent learning, and career-building activities like internships and networking [1]. The same can be said of the perceived curriculum relevance, which has a high impact on career readiness, demonstrating the significance of industry-specific learning material. When students feel that their curriculum is relevant to actual employment needs, they are more interested in learning and can apply classroom learning to on-the-job competency [43]. This result aligns with Human Capital Theory [7], which presumes that education is an investment in future work. It is also in line with existing studies, which suggest that graduates from business schools who believe their course of study is relevant are more likely to acquire the skills and confidence needed to enter the job market. These conclusions highlight the imperative for institutions of higher education to integrate career-directed learning approaches that stimulate motivation and connect academic content to labor market needs to make graduates adequately employable.

Further, this study confirms that academic motivation significantly fosters students' confidence in employability skills (H2a) and that perceived curriculum relevance plays a critical role in shaping such beliefs (H2b). These results imply that academically motivated students would be aware of and learn the essential skills for employment, supporting the idea that motivation enhances active learning and self-improvement. This is also aligned with Social Cognitive Career Theory [37], which emphasizes the importance of motivation and self-efficacy in career advancement. As demonstrated in the previous research, students who are motivated seek to pursue skill-developing activities such as internships, extracurricular experiences, and vocational training that enhance perceived employability [36]. Similarly, the influence of curriculum appropriateness on perceived employability skills is powerful, providing credence to the hypothesis that students whose studies align with industry demands are more likely to be assured of key employment skills like communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. This result conforms to previous research that emphasized the point that a well-structured curriculum with practical and industry-oriented learning elements leads to confidence in employability among graduates [19, 44]. The finding suggests that a curriculum not perceived as industry-relevant or outdated can lead to decreased confidence in possessing a skill set. In contrast, an industrial-related and utilitarian curriculum fosters stronger employability beliefs. These results also underscore the necessity for universities to regularly revise their curricula in response to changing labor market trends, integrate experiential learning experiences, and create a culture where students are encouraged to develop their skills proactively.

The results support that students' perception of developing skills fully mediates the effect of academic motivation on career readiness (H3a) and perceived curriculum relevance to career readiness (H3b), confirming the pivotal position of students' self-efficacy in the acquisition of skills towards career readiness. This implies that academically talented students who feel they are developing their abilities will be more courageous in venturing into the labor market as they take charge of seeking opportunities that build their professional skills [45]. Likewise, if students perceive the curriculum as relevant, they will gain greater confidence in developing their skills, making them more ready for employment. These findings are consistent with Human Capital Theory, which highlights that skill development increases career prospects, and with the current research proving that students who perceive skill development are actively involved in career-promoting activities such as internships and networking [33]. This highlights the importance of higher learning institutions integrating skill-based training activities and self-assessment tools. These tools enable learners to identify and articulate their professional skills and abilities, thereby converting motivation and course appropriateness into employability.

The research also confirms that perception of skill development mediates the relationship between academic motivation and perceived employability skills (H4a) and between perceived curriculum relevance and perceived employability skills (H4b), with the significance of students' confidence in their capability in influencing their perceived

employability. While motivated students are more likely to be involved in building skills and see the curriculum as applicable, it is their ability to identify such acquired skills that enhances their belief in being employable. This conforms to Social Cognitive Career Theory [7], where self-efficacy in skill acquisition will boost employability confidence. Earlier research has also indicated that students with high self-belief in their skill set are likely to undertake career planning, job-seeking behaviors, and professional development activities [13]. Hence, universities have to prioritize experiential learning and industry interaction to enable students not only to learn but also to recognize their skills, thus increasing their perceived employability.

The findings validate that learning engagement acts as a mediator for the relationships between career readiness and academic motivation (H5a) and between perceived curriculum relevance and career readiness (H5b) and show that active participation in learning among students has a significant impact on their career transitions. Highly motivated students participate more actively in the learning process, which leads to better career preparedness. Similarly, if they feel that their curriculum is consistent with industry requirements, they become more motivated, resulting in improved skill development and career confidence. It aligns with Self-Determination Theory [21], which states that motivated learners have improved knowledge retention and skill utilization, thereby enhancing career preparedness [28, 46]. The research highlights the importance of interactive, student-oriented pedagogical methods, such as project-based learning and case studies with real-life examples, which enhance interaction, motivation, and curriculum relevance, ultimately leading to better career outcomes.

The research affirms the mediating function of learning engagement in the academic motivation-career readiness (H6a), curriculum relevance-career readiness (H6b) relationship. The findings underscore that learners who are engaged in the learning process are in a position to realize better their academic motivation and curriculum relevance in concrete employability and career preparedness outcomes. Engagement in learning promotes increased understanding, critical thinking, and the capacity to transfer theoretical concepts to practical applications, which are essential for employability [29]. This resonates with Self-Determination Theory [21], which asserts that motivation facilitates engagement, promoting better learning and skill development. Besides, motivated students will be inclined towards co-curricular and extracurricular engagements, like student organizations, workshops, and internships, which all benefit them in their career development and employment [40]. Still, curriculum significance or academic motivation is not a guarantee for employment unless the learners are committed to the process of learning. Universities should adopt teaching approaches that foster active learning, such as flipped classrooms, problem-based learning, and experiential education, to ensure students are not only encouraged but also highly engaged in their learning processes. Institutions should also incorporate industry-driven projects and case studies into the curriculum to boost engagement and make students more aware of how their academic learning is applicable in real-world working environments.

Findings also confirm the moderating impact of internship prospects on the associations between academic motivation and career preparation (H7a) as well as curriculum relevance and career preparation (H7b) to show that students with the prospect of internships are more competent to convert the motivation and curricular relevance to career readiness. Internships fill the gap between theory and practice, offering students hands-on experience, professional contacts, and a clearer sense of career direction [12]. This subscribes to experiential learning theory, which emphasizes the role of hands-on learning in solidifying theoretical knowledge. Where numerous internship opportunities are available, students can apply in class what they learned, increase their confidence level, and prepare themselves for work. In contrast, when these opportunities are limited, students struggle to apply their academic knowledge, which diminishes the effectiveness of motivation and the value of the curriculum in preparing for careers. The results highlight the need for higher education institutions to expand internship programs, develop stronger industry partnerships, and integrate work-integrated learning into the curriculum [20]. Policies need to be developed in a manner that provides equal access to valuable internship experiences for all students, irrespective of socioeconomic status. By integrating internship programs into the fabric of higher education, universities are well placed to advance the development of student employability and prepare them for the harsh realities of the job market.

Finally, the research reaffirms that internship experience mediates the relationship between academic motivation and perceived employability skills (H8a) and between perceived relevance of the curriculum and perceived employability skills (H8b), reaffirming the central importance of work experience in shaping students' beliefs about their employability. These results suggest that the relevance of the curriculum and motivation to academic work have an impact on perceptions of employability. Still, this influence is significantly amplified when students are allowed to undertake internships. Internships provide students with a platform to develop and showcase their potential in real-world contexts, making it easier for them to gain experience in specific fields, enhance their professional skills, and boost their self-confidence regarding their employability [3]. Without such a platform, students may struggle to apply their learning in the job market, which can hinder their confidence in securing employment. These findings suggest that policy-makers and universities must prioritize formal internship programs and industry collaborations to enhance students' employability. Moreover, career services can further help advise students into appropriate internship programs and enable them to express the skills they gain through such internships [6]. By integrating work-based learning into the curriculum, institutions can ensure that students graduate with not only knowledge but also hands-on experience, making them employable and competitive in the labor market. Although the findings verify that internship experience significantly enhances the association between both academic motivation and curriculum relevance and employability

outcomes, attention needs to be given to the heterogeneity of these experiences. Intensity, duration, and quality of internships will vary, as well as institution to institution and industry partner to industry partner, and these may have a bearing on the strength of their moderating role. More extended, formal internships with well-defined learning goals and close monitoring could offer more advantages than brief or less organized placements. Subsequent studies might include internship quality and length measures to capture these subtleties more accurately and determine how they differentially affect career readiness and perceptions of employability.

In general, the findings of the study support the idea that employability and career readiness are complex constructs influenced by individual and institutional determinants. Although academic motivation and curriculum congruence provide the foundation for skill development and professional readiness, the extent to which students embrace learning and perceive themselves as crafting their skills influences their confidence in their career futures. Additionally, internship experience is an external motivator of these connections that further reinforces them and suggests the need for higher education institutions to have better industry relationships and experiential learning strategies. By integrating these conclusions into instructional models, colleges and universities can provide a more structured and supportive learning environment that not only imparts general knowledge but also ensures that graduates possess the confidence, ability, and experience necessary to succeed in an increasingly competitive marketplace. Future research can further explore other contextual and psychological determinants of employability perceptions to enable schools to develop further to keep up with the continuously changing demands of the international labor market.

7- Conclusion

This research explored how academic motivation and perceived curriculum relevance affect career readiness and perceived employability skills among Omani business students, with the perception of skill development and learning engagement as mediators and internship opportunities as a moderator. Employing SEM with data obtained from 386 students, the findings revealed that both academic motivation and curriculum relevance significantly increased career readiness and employability skills. The mediating functions of learning engagement perception and skill development perception underscore the critical role of internal cognitive and behavioral processes in operationalizing motivation and curriculum alignment into concrete employability outcomes. Additionally, internship experience was shown to enhance these associations, affirming the role of experiential learning in filling the void between academic preparedness and workplace realities.

The results hold significant theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, they build upon Self-Determination Theory, Human Capital Theory, Social Cognitive Career Theory, and Experiential Learning Theory by combining motivational, curricular, and experiential variables into one theoretical framework. In practice, the findings imply that institutions of higher education need to foster intrinsic motivation using active pedagogy, align curriculum with employer requirements, and offer systematic internship programs to facilitate skill application in authentic settings. For policy-makers, the findings support the establishment of national policies that encourage university–industry collaborations and competency-based training models. This research is constrained by its use of cross-sectional, self-reported data and a single-country level in this study. Future studies should employ longitudinal designs, investigate more psychological and institutional variables, and examine cross-national differences to assess the generalizability of results. By examining these areas, subsequent research can further develop strategies for preparing graduates with the skills, confidence, and flexibility to succeed in a more competitive international jobs market.

8- Implications

8-1- Practical Implications

The conclusions of this research provide significant implications for higher education institutions, policymakers, and employers in promoting graduates' career readiness and employability skills. University leaders need first to acknowledge the central role of academic motivation and curriculum applicability in determining students' readiness for the workplace and employability attitudes. This requires a redesign of the curriculum to match industry needs, integrating real-world case studies, industry-led projects, and competency-based learning to increase perceived relevance. Furthermore, the development of intrinsic motivation through challenging teaching methods, mentorship programs, and goal-setting workshops can lead to students taking a greater sense of control over their career development. Second, the mediating influence of learning engagement and perception of skill development emphasizes enhancing a more experiential, interactive, and skills-focused learning environment. Universities should incorporate work-integrated learning (WIL), simulations, hands-on training, and professional development workshops into their offerings. This approach enables students to develop not only technical skills but also to identify and express their competencies. Third, the moderating influence of internship opportunities emphasizes the imperative of close industry-academia collaboration. Universities must increase their partnership with industry, providing formal and compulsory internships, apprenticeships, and cooperative education to make available practical exposure in the workplace for all students. Career centers need to take a more active role in counseling students to appropriate internships, improving resume-building techniques, and making networking with potential employers easier. Policymakers must strive to create national employability frameworks, encourage industries to offer more internship opportunities, and promote policies

that narrow the skill gap between graduates and the needs of the labor market. Employers, meanwhile, must see their role in developing future talent by actively engaging with universities through guest lectures, mentorship schemes, and industry-academic advisory boards. The findings have direct implications for internal program review processes and accreditation bodies in higher education. Universities can systematically integrate these findings into quality assurance systems by: (1) including academic motivation and curriculum relevance measures in program evaluation indicators; (2) monitoring student participation and perception of developing skills as key performance indicators; and (3) mandating systematic internship programs with standardized learning objectives and evaluation criteria. Accreditation bodies may utilize such indicators to determine the degree to which programs promote employability outcomes, making business curricula sensitive to the needs of the labor market and aligned with the national strategic objectives like Oman Vision 2040.

8-2- Theoretical Implications

This research adds value to the current knowledge base by broadening the theoretical insight of how academic motivation and perceived curriculum relevance impact employability and career readiness skills through the mediating effects of skill development perception, learning engagement, and the moderating effect of internship opportunities. The results provide empirical support and extension of Self-Determination Theory by showing that intrinsic motivation in the academic environment promotes engagement and increases students' career readiness and self-assessed employability. This supports the theory's contention that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are the drivers of human motivation and development, and thus, institutions of higher education should promote learning environments that support these psychological needs. In addition, the findings verify Human Capital Theory as it confirms the notion that persons who feel that they are accumulating appropriate skills believe more in their employability and career opportunities and highlight the relevance of both skills acquisition and awareness of these skills by students as determinants of labor market outcome. Finally, the research incorporates Experiential Learning Theory by emphasizing the role of experiential, hands-on experiences, like internships, as critical moderators that enhance the relationship between academic learning and employability outcomes. The internship opportunity moderating function complements Career Construction Theory, which assumes individuals self-consciously construct their career by means of experience, influencing their professional identity, and being adaptable. By integrating these theoretical approaches, this research gives a more integrated model of understanding higher education employability development, highlighting that motivation, curriculum development, experiential learning, and industry contact all play interrelated roles in students' employment transition. Further research can use these findings to examine other psychological, institutional, and labor market factors that will further sharpen the theoretical concept of employability development in various educational and economic contexts.

8-3- Limitations and Future Directions

Although a valuable contribution, this study has some limitations that need to be noted. In the first place, the research heavily depends on self-reported information, which can lead to common method bias and social desirability bias, as students may overstate their motivation, engagement, skill acquisition, or readiness for their careers. Subsequent research may take a multi-source design, including employer ratings, faculty ratings, or behavioral ratings to provide a more objective estimate of employability skills and career readiness. Second, the present study is specific to the context of higher education institutions in Oman, which may restrict its generalizability to other parts of the world with varying educational systems, labor market organization, and cultural environments. Future studies could conduct cross-country comparative research to investigate whether the found relations are robust across various economic and institutional contexts. Third, even though this paper establishes important mediating and moderating ties, it does not investigate longitudinal impacts. Career preparedness and employability skills unfold over time, and a cross-sectional design will not be able to fully depict the dynamic character of skill formation and labor market adaptation. Future studies ought to utilize longitudinal studies to follow students from their school life up to their initial career years to measure how these relationships change over time. While this research used procedural and statistical controls to reduce common method bias, reliance on self-reported measures means that bias cannot be eliminated. Future studies may be aided by employing multiple data sources, such as survey respondents and employer or faculty ratings, or observational data, to enhance the objectivity of employability and career readiness measures. The results must be understood in the context of the institutional and cultural setting of Oman, characterized by unique higher education frameworks, labor market features, and societal norms within the MENA region or even the rest of the world. Although some of the mechanisms—e.g., the impact of motivation, curriculum alignment, and internships—will have generalizability across settings, their size and direction could vary elsewhere because educational governance, industry-academia partnerships, and work readiness norms are not the same. International studies comparing countries in the MENA region or other settings are required to ensure the external validity of these conclusions.

Furthermore, other possible moderators and mediators of the employability development process could be investigated in future studies. For example, psychological traits like adaptability at work, resilience, and self-efficacy can be crucial in influencing students' attitudes towards being employable and career-ready. In the same vein, institutional variables like faculty effectiveness in teaching, career services assistance, and industry collaborations may be explored as contextual moderators of the effect of motivation and curriculum applicability on employability outcomes. Additionally, with the fast pace of technological change and the changing nature of the job market, future

research may explore how digital competencies, AI-driven learning tools, and virtual internships affect employability perceptions. Another potential line of inquiry would be to measure the impact that post-pandemic shifts in the higher education and work environment, including hybrid learning models and gig economy career opportunities, have on students' career readiness and skill development. Finally, although this research is centered on business education, future studies may investigate whether the suggested relationships are valid across various disciplines, including STEM, humanities, and vocational education, to gain a broader picture of employability development in different educational domains. By overcoming these constraints and broadening research in scope, academics can further develop theory in employability and contribute to the ongoing refinement of higher education and workforce integration.

9- Declarations

9-1- Author Contributions

Conceptualization, H.M., F.A., and F.A.; methodology, M.A.; software, F.A.; validation, A.A., M.A., and H.M.; formal analysis, F.A.; investigation, A.A. and M.A.; resources, M.A.; data curation, H.M.; writing—original draft preparation, H.M.; writing—review and editing, M.A. and A.A.; visualization, F.A.; supervision, H.M.; project administration, H.M.; funding acquisition, H.M. and F.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

9-2- Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available in the article.

9-3- Funding

The research leading to these results has been funded by the Research Council (TRC) of the Sultanate of Oman under the Block Funding Program. TRC Block Funding Agreement No: [MoHERI/BFP/MCBS/2024].

9-4- Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was approved by the Institutional Research Ethics and Intellectual Property Committee (REIC) of Modern College of Business and Sciences (MCBS), Oman (Approval No.: 6937/res/85; approved on 09/04/2025).

9-5- Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

9-6- Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of this manuscript. In addition, the ethical issues, including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsification, double publication and/or submission, and redundancies have been completely observed by the authors.

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Appendix I: Survey Questionnaire

Title: Employability Skills Development from Students' Perspective

Introduction:

Dear Respondent,

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this research study. This study aims to examine the employability skills of business graduates in Omani higher education institutions. Your valuable insights will help identify the skills graduates need to meet labor market demands and improve business education.

Your participation in this survey is entirely voluntary, and your responses will remain anonymous and confidential. The data collected will be used solely for academic research purposes.

Please read each statement carefully and respond honestly based on your experiences and perceptions. The survey should take approximately **10–15 minutes** to complete.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Section A: Demographic Information (Please tick ✓ the appropriate option or fill in the blanks)

1. Age Group

- 18–22
- 23–27
- 28+

2. Gender

- Male
- Female

3. Academic Background (Current Level of Study)

- Diploma
- Bachelor's Degree
- Master's Degree

4. Year of Study

- First Year
- Second Year
- Third Year
- Fourth Year
- Graduate Student

5. Major/Field of Study

- Business Administration
- Accounting & Finance
- Marketing
- Human Resource Management
- Economics
- Other (please specify)

6. Institution Type

- Public University
- Private University/College
- Technical/Applied Sciences College

7. Employment & Career Readiness

- Have you completed an internship or work placement?
- Yes
- No

8. Do you currently have a part-time or full-time job?

- Yes, part-time
- Yes, full-time
- No

9. What is your career goal after graduation?

- Employment in the private sector
- Employment in the public sector
- Entrepreneurship/start my own business
- Pursue further education (Master's/PhD)
- Undecided

10. Employability Skills & Readiness

- How confident are you in your employability skills?
- Very confident
- Somewhat confident
- Neutral
- Not very confident
- Not confident at all

11. Which employability skills do you feel strongest in? (Check all that apply)

- Communication skills
- Critical thinking & problem-solving
- Teamwork & collaboration
- Leadership skills
- Digital literacy & technical skills
- Time management
- Adaptability & resilience

12. Which skills do you feel need further development? (Check all that apply)

- Communication skills
- Critical thinking & problem-solving
- Teamwork & collaboration
- Leadership skills
- Digital literacy & technical skills
- Time management
- Adaptability & resilience

13. University Support & Career Preparation

- Do you believe your university provides sufficient employability skills training?
- Yes, very effective
- Somewhat effective
- Neutral
- Not very effective
- Not effective at all

14. Which career development activities have you participated in? (Check all that apply)

- Internships/work placements
- Career counseling sessions
- Job fairs & networking events
- Soft skills training workshops
- Entrepreneurship programs

15. How can your university improve employability skills development?

- More internship opportunities
- Stronger industry connections
- More career-related workshops
- Improved academic curriculum alignment with industry needs
- Other (please specify)

Section B: Employability Skills and Learning Experience

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements using the **5-point Likert Scale**:

1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neutral 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree

Academic Motivation (AM)

Item	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
AM_1	I am motivated to perform well academically to improve my future career prospects.					
AM_2	I put in extra effort in my studies to increase my chances of getting a good job after graduation.					
AM_3	I am enthusiastic about the subjects I study because they help me build a successful career.					
AM_4	I focus on learning the skills needed for the workforce while studying.					
AM_5	I aim to gain as much practical knowledge as possible during my academic studies.					

Perceived Relevance of Curriculum (PRC)

Item	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
PRC_6	The courses I take are relevant to the skills needed in my future career.					
PRC_7	The business curriculum at my university prepares me for the current demands of the job market.					
PRC_8	The knowledge I gain in class is applicable to real-world job scenarios.					
PRC_9	The curriculum includes sufficient content related to the skills employers are looking for.					
PRC_10	The content of the courses aligns with industry needs and trends.					

Career Readiness (CR)

Item	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
CR_11	I feel prepared to start a career in business after graduating.					
CR_12	I am confident that I can secure a job soon after completing my degree.					
CR_13	I feel that I am ready to face the challenges of the professional world.					
CR_14	I am confident in my ability to adapt to a professional work environment.					

Perceived Employability Skills (PES)

Item	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
PES_15	I have developed strong communication skills during my studies.					
PES_16	I am able to work effectively as part of a team due to my academic experiences.					
PES_17	I feel that I have acquired the necessary problem-solving skills through my coursework.					
PES_18	My education has helped me develop leadership skills that will benefit my career.					
PES_19	I have gained critical thinking skills that I can apply to real-world problems.					

Internship Opportunities (IO)

Item	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
IO_20	I have had access to internship opportunities as part of my academic program.					
IO_21	The internships I have participated in have provided me with valuable industry experience.					
IO_22	My university offers strong support for students seeking internships or work placements.					
IO_23	I feel that internship experiences enhance my employability skills and career prospects.					
IO_24	The internships I have participated in have helped me build professional networks.					

Skill Development Perception (SDP)

Item	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
SDP_26	I believe my courses have helped me develop important professional skills.					
SDP_27	I feel my academic studies have improved my ability to think critically and analytically.					
SDP_28	I have developed practical, job-related skills through my academic experiences.					
SDP_29	I perceive my education as a valuable investment in my future employability.					
SDP_30	The curriculum has helped me develop the technical skills needed for my future career.					
SDP_31	I have acquired strong analytical and problem-solving skills through my academic studies.					
SDP_32	My studies have enabled me to acquire transferable skills that I can use in different industries.					

Learning Engagement (LE)

Item	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
LE_33	I actively participate in classroom activities and discussions to enhance my learning.					
LE_34	I engage in group projects and collaborative learning to develop my professional skills.					
LE_35	I regularly seek additional learning opportunities outside of the classroom (e.g., workshops, seminars).					
LE_36	I make an effort to connect what I learn in class to real-world issues and challenges.					
LE_37	I engage in extracurricular activities that support my professional development.					
LE_38	I participate in online learning platforms or forums to enhance my knowledge.					
LE_39	I actively seek feedback from my professors to improve my academic performance.					
LE_40	I invest time in self-study to further my understanding of the subjects I study.					