Assessing Field Practical Training for Skills Acquisition among University Business Students in Tanzania: Enhancing Graduates' Employability

Juma James Masele[1] & John R.M. Philemon[2]
[1]Department of General Management, University of Dar es Salaam Business School (UDBS), Dar es Salaam – Tanzania
[2]Department of Marketing, University of Dar es Salaam Business School (UDBS), Dar es Salaam – Tanzania
Corresponding author[1]: masele@udsm.ac.tz; masele2000@yahoo.com
Email[2]: philemon.john@udsm.ac.tz; qusa5@yahoo.com

Abstract

Although previous studies acknowledge the contribution of field practical training (FPT) in skill development, its effectiveness remains unclear. This study assessed the efficacy of FPT in skills acquisition among university business students in both public and private universities in Tanzania. Specifically, the study examined how FPT programmes provide university students with opportunities to learn about their intended business careers through work-related experience, the extent to which FPT helps them develop relevant practical skills, and the challenges they face in acquiring these skills. Data were collected from 514 business-related degree students across both private and public higher learning institutions (HLIs) in Tanzania. A t-test comparison of means revealed that FPT was effective in imparting practical skills to students, thus enhancing their employability. However, the challenges faced in executing FPT differed between private and public HLIs, including limited access to workplace activities, cultural disparities between academia and industry, and the lack of supportive practical training supervisors. Field students are, therefore, more likely to acquire practical business skills through internships in the private sector than in the public sector. The findings contribute to validating human capital theory across various contexts and enrich the literature on FPT experiences and skills development.

Keywords: *Human capital, employability, business students, field practical training, skills*

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Introduction

Globally, higher education plays a crucial role in developing competent human resources to meet the workforce demands of the public sector, private sector, and diverse economic players, driving national economic growth. According to

Ramdass (2012), a highly skilled labour force that can employ new knowledge, technologies, and business improvement methodologies is developed through a broad general higher education system. Learners in professional programmes must be able to put into practice what they have learned in the classroom (Wrenn & Wrenn, 2009). Research indicates that graduating students must possess not only transferable professional skills but also key attributes that enable them to thrive in an ever-evolving workplace (Gill, 2020; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). It is from these concerns that Torres-Machi et al. (2013) and Bhanugopan and Fish (2009) have emphasised the importance of combining students' wider attributes and skills, alongside their subject knowledge and academic skills, to be of immediate value to prospective employers and enhance employability. The gaps between the university learning domain and the work-life demand can be reduced by University-Industry linkages (Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016). Such activities can include customising education and training to serve the needs of the job market (Nuwagaba, 2012) and the improvement of practical and entrepreneurial skills (Mbah, 2014).

Field practical training (FPT) is a vital component of university education and a requirement for completing undergraduate studies in most Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs) in Tanzania and many other countries. It offers students practical learning experiences in real-world settings through student work experience programmes or university-industry internships, where they work under joint faculty and industry supervision (Peasland et al., 2023). Oladele et al. (2011) highlight FPT as an opportunity to introduce students to experiential education that could help them increase their competence in the practical skills examined, enhance interaction with professionals, and develop meaningful relationships, among others. It is opined that students should engage with and experience their environment to prepare for dynamic workplaces. This exposure enhances their competence, self-awareness, knowledge, and practical skills as practitioners.

In the context of business schools, FPT has a crucial role to play in optimising learning processes and thereby offering – a dramatic improvement in human resources competencies. The training is a student tool to 'fill the gap' between campus curriculum and real-world practices (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). It helps learners not only develop their chosen careers but also gives them chances to see how different aspects of it work. According to Delecta and Raman (2019), today's employers want graduates with cross-cultural experiences. This is because traditional classroom lecture-based delivery systems provide limited opportunities to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to explore careers (Haleem et al., 2022). Similarly, Twyford and Dean (2023) assert that a work placement provides undergraduate students with real-life working skills that can help them build skills in professional communication, time management, teamwork, and networking. They also help students develop skills in planning, organising and the ability to appear self-confident,

negotiation skills, the ability to understand and adapt to the workplace culture, problem-solving and decision-making, numeracy and IT literacy, and an increase in commercial awareness, to mention a few. This is also supported by **Šnýdrová** et al. (2019), who revealed that FPTs bring a more global view of corporate practice and a more realistic view of study and issues studied. While what students hear and see during the teaching-learning process may be doubted, what they do cannot be questioned (Skilbeck, 1998). Student-led demonstrations, guided by field supervisors, enhance the practical value of academic training (Oladele et al., 2011). Such exposure enables students to integrate theoretical knowledge with hands-on skills.

Due to the recognition of the enormous role that experiential learning plays in theoretical classroom teaching (Oladele et al., 2011), FPT is a requirement for all students who enrol in all undergraduate business-related programmes in Tanzania. According to the University of Dar es Salaam's regulations, for example, students in selected social science programmes are required to do their three months of FPT in companies (Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016). Business schools and departments in Tanzania universities have field attachments designed to offer students some business practical experience in the actual work environment. A study conducted by Ishengoma & Vaaland (2016) at the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) and Ardhi University (ARU) – Tanzania, observed that despite the weak linkage between HLIs and industries in Tanzania, strengthening them would greatly help in scaling down unemployment risk.

Yet, although studies acknowledge the contribution of FPT in skill development (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; **Šnýdrová** et al., 2019; Gill, 2020), doubts about its effectiveness in learners' skills development persist (Oladele et al., 2011; Metcalfe et al., 2020). Studies link the ineffectiveness of FPT to a number of factors, including limited access to workplace activities (Ndibalema and Kambona, 2018), the cultural difference between academia and industries (Mgonja, 2017) and inadequate resources to support FPT activities (Sjoo & Hellstrom, 2019). While FPT, in almost all HLIs in Tanzania, is mandatory for every student at least once before graduation, anecdotal reports indicate that most graduating students are unemployable. Yet, in many developing countries, the phenomenon remains unexplored (Anderson & Sanga 2019). Therefore, understanding the effectiveness of FPT for business competence skills acquisition among business students in Tanzania as the country pursues increasing graduates' employability is important. The questions that arise from the statement above are: Do the FPT programmes among universities in Tanzania provide students with the opportunities to learn about the business occupation of their choice through work-related practical experience? Is the field practical training conducted by university students capable of developing appropriate and relevant students' practical skills? Are there any challenges towards developing students' practical skills in business?

The objective of this study is to determine the extent of students' business competency acquisition as a result of undertaking university FPT in Tanzania. Specifically, the study seeks to assess the extent to which FPT programmes among universities in Tanzania provide students with the opportunities to learn about the intended business occupation through work-related practical experience, assess the extent to which FPT conducted by university students are capable of developing appropriate and relevant students' practical skills; and identify challenges learners, face towards developing practical skills in business. The rest of this paper presents the theoretical and empirical literature review, methodology, findings, and respective discussion. Lastly, conclusions, study implications, study limitations, and possible areas for further study are included.

Theoretical and Empirical Literature Review

Theoretical literature review

The supposedly drastic shift from a production economy to a knowledge economy at the turn of the 21st century catapulted human capital to the peak of attention and interest from policymakers, researchers, human resources practitioners, economists and labour unionists. In the words of Rosen (1989), "human capital is the stock of skills and productive knowledge embodied in people." It is against this backdrop that this study adopted Human Capital Theory by Becker (1962) to inform and lay a ground upon which university students' FPT could be juxtaposed. The theory presumes investment in education is necessary for skills and knowledge acquisition and subsequent increases in individual capital and work productivity (Marijani et al., 2023a; Wuttaphan, 2017; Oketch, 2014). According to this theory, human beings are considered to be vital resources that need to be invested mainly through training to boost their productivity on the job (Morozoua, 2016). The integration of theoretical knowledge with practical skills is a key aspect of preparing students for employment, and it aligns with the theory's focus on the importance of investing in education and training for individual success in the labour market. According to Xu and Fletcher (2017), students, who, in the context of this study, are potential future workers, accumulate human capital and thus increase their value in the marketplace. This happens as their generic skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours related to work improve, hence bringing more expertise and effectiveness to their job tasks (Rivaldo & Nabella, 2023; Ozkeser, B., 2019).

Notwithstanding the widespread application and appreciation of human capital theory in various domains outside economics, it is criticised on multiple fronts, including statistics, practicality, morality, and methodology. This study does not aim to list out all the theory's weaknesses. Instead, it acknowledges that, like any theory, it is not perfect. Gallego and Robinson (2014) also dispute the assertations

by the human capital theory that any difference in remuneration in the labour market is due to human capital. Researchers argue that there are three explanations for wage differential other than education. The first is compensating differentials, i.e., workers may be paid less because of the lower effort requirements of the job, more pleasant working conditions, or even better amenities. Secondly, labour market imperfections, that is to say, employees with identical human capital, may earn different wages due to variations in job productivity and pay. Third, taste-based discrimination offers valid explanations for the differences. A more elaborate criticism of the theory is made by Marginson (2017). The researcher argues that human capital theory lacks realism in four areas: (1) human capital uses a closed analytical system and independent variable but neither external effects nor codependence can be eliminated from the problems it addresses; (2) a linear theory is applied to materials that are non-homogeneous in space and time;
(3) the theory unifies two heterogenous domains, education and work, as if they are a single domain and (4) the theory eliminates other possible explanations of education/work relation.

Despite its notable weaknesses and the criticisms presented and argued above, albeit briefly, the Human Capital Theory offers a framework to assess the effectiveness of FPT provided by higher learning institutions about opportunities for learning about the intended business occupation and acquiring relevant practical skills. Moreover, it can aid in designing high-quality teaching, learning, and FPT placements to attain desired outcomes among university students and subsequent graduates. By applying these lenses, educators and institutions can optimise the alignment between academic training and real-world professional demands, fostering a more impactful learning experience for students. Ultimately, the theory serves as a valuable tool for enhancing the overall educational and FPT processes within HLIs. Several empirical studies have employed the Human Capital Theory in studying employability (Mgaiwa, 2021; Mwita, 2018), motives for further studies (Fényes & Mohácsi, 2020), employees' performance (Kamukama et al., 2010) among others. It was from this standpoint that this study found the theory useful in guiding the study phenomenon under investigation.

Empirical literature review

Skills match for employability

Employers' insistence on fresh graduates possessing "must-have skills" has ignited interest in conducting numerous empirical studies in this area. One key issue of concern, according to Kessy (2020), is that universities or colleges are producing students with "curricular miss out the practical aspects that are needed in the labour market." As highlighted by Mgaiwa (2021), a growing body of literature on

graduates' employability has uncovered barriers to employability, spanning from skills mismatch to a deficiency in soft skills. In tackling the issue of mismatch, the researcher discovered that enhancing employability in developing countries, especially in Tanzania, can be achieved by leveraging university practices to augment graduates' skills, thereby making them more appealing to potential employers. In an attempt to understand the motives behind further studies, Hajnalka and Mohács (2020) found that underprivileged students may be unaware that higher education is an efficient mechanism to accumulate social and cultural capital. Benati and Fischer (2020) posit that graduates' inadequate preparation for the workplace concerning human, social, cultural, and identity capital leads to a deficiency in psychological capital and their capacity to navigate workplace stress and the expectations of a professional environment.

Marijani et al. (2023a) highlighted the views of the host organisations for students who are on field-based practical training, whereby only thirty-four host institutions' supervisors (50.7%) strongly agreed that students had enough practical knowledge. This is truly a small percentage and does not augur well for the university education offered at public universities. The findings are collaborated by Msuya (2022), who also found that students on field-based practical training were denied unlimited access to some important learning facilities, such as the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), lacked infrastructural support and were not trusted to handle some key administrative matters. The findings by Msuya (2022) seem to be no exception. This was also alluded to by Ndibalema and Kambona (2018), who found that students who are in field-based practical training have limited access to instructional materials, orientation guidelines, and a generally poor working environment, among other challenges. These conditions are considered a hindrance to the effective impartation of the necessary skills and competencies to be able to deliver as per employers' expectations upon graduation.

Possibilities and challenges for field practical training

While the employability of graduates remains one of the important research issues, numerous studies (e.g., Anderson & Lees, 2017; Wrenn & Wrenn, 2009) have questioned whether universities are poised to prepare and equip students with the necessary skills and enhance their employability. Accordingly, recent years have witnessed a great drift away from knowledge-based education to competence-based education. Today, universities are expected to produce graduates who are capable of delivering on their first day at a workplace and are equipped with the prerequisite skills and apt attitudes (Mgaiwa, 2021). To be able to forge and mould students of that calibre, universities need to re-orient themselves and adapt to the expectations of the marketplace. Some scholars and researchers alike, however, consider that ensuring that students acquire employability skills is not the universities' role (Anderson & Lees,

2017) and that these skills cannot be effectively developed within classrooms (Wrenn & Wrenn, 2009).

To supplement universities' classroom efforts, universities introduce FPT to enhance the student's employability skills. FPT is considered instrumental to graduates' job readiness (BIHECC, 2007) by building student confidence in their workplace capabilities (Oladele et al., 2011). Moreover, the placement programmes reportedly enhance employability, workplace integration, and career advancement compared to conventional graduation (Gill, 2020). Peasland et al. (2023) also opine that FPT accelerates students' maturity and accountability, making them easily tuned to the workplace. Notwithstanding the assertion made regarding the instrumentality of FPT, other studies have questioned whether FPT truly enables appropriate skills transfer. Others even doubtfully question if FPT is a panacea to the unemployment challenges facing societies today. Those who doubt this purported transfer are stating that there is no proper integration between what is taught in class and what the students are exposed to during FPT.

Unlike the existence of studies on FPT in relation to employability, they are majorly from outside Tanzania, including Botswana, South Africa, India, China, South Pacific Island nations, and the like. Studies from Tanzania are limited to Instructional methods (Msuya, 2022), University-Industry Collaboration (Anderson & Sanga, 2019; Mgonja, 2017; Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016), role of work-integrated learning in developing work readiness (Marijani et al., 2023b) and Challenges towards professional learning Opportunities among Student-Teachers during teaching practices (Ndibalema & Kambona, 2018) and others. To the best of researchers' knowledge, the question of the effectiveness of FPT for students' acquisition of business skills remains silent.

This study hypothesised that the H1: *FPT programme enhances students' opportunities to learn about their intended business occupation.*

Yet, the extent to which FPT attended by students in the Tanzanian context are capable of developing appropriate and relevant practice skills was not clear, as the literature was silent. Marijani et al. (2023b) suggest that FPT need to encompass strategies to match on-campus learning and how it might apply to the workplace setting before students go on placement. From this backdrop, this study hypothesised:

H2: *FPT programmes are capable of developing appropriate and relevant students' practical* skills.

Literature, however, reveals that despite the well-intentioned FPT, the exercise is fraught with several challenges. Ndibalema and Kambona (2018) and Kessy (2022) asserted that FPT is challenged by limited mentorship and coaching, lack of working facilities and overcrowded offices. These findings are corroborated by Marijani et al.

(2023a), who also found that most of the host institutions lack funding to support field students, the heavy workload on the purported supervisors, shortages of working equipment, and other human resources constraints. Different challenges, Marijani et al. (2023a) contend, are a shortage of time for mentorship and coaching and a lack of capacity from the staff of the host institutions. While those above are on the host institutions, higher learning institutions are equally confounded by immensurable challenges when it comes to implementing FPT. As it is with host institutions, higher learning institutions are also encumbered by a lack of adequate financial resources to supervise the FPT students and the absence of proper and effective policy guidelines (Marijani et al., 2023a). It is, however, not clear whether the challenges faced by HLI students significantly differ between private and public sector organisations.

The third hypothesis is presented as *H3. The challenges faced by FPT students are significantly different between public and private sector organisations.*

Methodology

This study was conducted at six selected universities, namely the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), Ardhi University (ARU), Mzumbe University (MU), University of Dodoma (UDOM), Dar es Salaam Tumaini University (DARTU) and Saint August University of Tanzania (SAUT). These universities were selected to represent a diverse geographical and institutional spread across Tanzania, ensuring comprehensive insights into higher education dynamics by including both public and private institutions. Besides, these universities were purposively selected due to the fact that they have been offering business studies at both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes for more than 10 years. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey descriptive research design, whereby a questionnaire with tasks related to the competencies that students supposedly acquire from the HLIs courses was used. The questionnaire items were developed from the literature review. A sample of 514 respondent students was calculated from the Yamane formula and conveniently selected from a population of approximately 20,139 business students who had enrolled in Tanzania's universities in the year 2021 (TCU Vital Stats, 2021).

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Competence in performing the tasks during FPT was measured using a five-point Likert scale. This study adapted scales whose items were only slightly modified to fit the Tanzania university education context. The scales were coded as: 1-Strongly disagree 2-Disagree 3 Neither disagree nor agree 4-Agree 5-Strongly Agree. The efficacy of FPT was assessed by assessing the extent to which FPT programmes

provided trainees with the opportunities to learn about the intended business occupation through work practical experience; the FPT capability in developing appropriate and relevant students' practical skills, the assessment was done to compare students before and after the FPT. The students were asked to indicate the extent of agreement or disagreement with statements related to skills acquired from FPT programmes. Before the data collection process, the survey questionnaire was submitted to four academic staff members of the business school, one from each business department, for content validation. The questionnaire was further subjected to 20 respondents' pilot testing in order to clear any ambiguity before it was used for the actual survey. The suggestions of the staff members, as well as the pilot test, were incorporated into the final version of the questionnaire. A descriptive analysis was done, whereby data was presented in frequencies, percentages, mean and standard deviations.

A t-test was used to compare group means of respondents attending FPT from private vis-à-vis those from public sectors. The t-test was considered ideal for this study as it adhered to using simple random extraction, normal distribution of data, appropriate sample size, and homogeneity of variance (Kim, 2015). Studies (Vieira, 2016; de Winter & Dodou, 2012) affirm that the t-test is considered valid in comparing groups even when the variable is measured using a Likert scale. A one-sample statistics T-test was conducted to compare the means of the tested item. A benchmark of 3 was employed to represent the undecided option in the 5-point Likert scale – Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Neither Agree nor Disagree (NDNA), Agree (A), and Strongly Agree (SA). For the third objective, which sought to assess the Challenges learners face towards developing practical skills in business, both One-Sample Statistics and Independent Sample T-tests were used to see whether the challenges differed from the private sector or public sector students. The Tables for mean were used to show differences within groups and across subgroups from which inferences and conclusions were made. Subsequently, a series of independent sample t-tests were conducted on the tested items, employing a benchmark of 3, representing the undecided option in the 5-point Likert scale. The findings are presented in Tables 2, 3, 4 and 5.

Findings

Demographic profiles of respondents

Table 1 presents an overview of the sample profile, showing key demographic and experiential characteristics. The sample had a slight majority of female respondents (53.5%). Moreover, the majority of them fall within the younger age from 23 to 25 years old, constituting 56.8%. In terms of FPT distribution, the majority of respondents, accounting for 66.9%, underwent their FPT within the public sector, while 33.1% were within the private sector. The majority (33.5%) of respondents

were from UDSM, followed by SAUT (20.6%), then Mzumbe (15.8%), followed by UDOM (15%), then ARU (11.1%) and DARTU (4.1%). The academic backgrounds of the surveyed individuals varied, with 42.1% holding a Bachelor of Commerce degree, 6.2% possessing a Bachelor of Business Administration degree, and the remaining 51.7% having other educational qualifications. Notably, a considerable proportion of respondents, totalling over 58.1%, reported engaging in field-based practical training for eight weeks. Interestingly, 40.2% of the surveyed individuals took proactive measures to secure their placements, indicating a degree of initiative and agency in their professional development pursuits.

Table 1

Respondent's Profile

	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Age	19-22 years	201	39.1
	23-25 years	292	56.8
	Above 25 years	21	4.1
Gender	Male	239	46.5
	Female	275	53.5
HLIs of Study	University of Dar es salaam (UDBS)	172	33.5
	St. Augustine University of Tanzania	106	20.6
	Mzumbe University	81	15.8
	University of Dodoma	77	15.0
	Ardhi University	57	11.1
	Dar es salaam Tumaini University	21	4.1
Degree Programme	Bachelor of Commerce	216	42.1
	Bachelor of Business Administration	32	6.2
	Others	265	51.7
Sector for the practical training	Public sector	344	66.9
	Private sector	170	33.1
How secured the practical training placement	Own initiative	206	40.2
	FPT coordinator	143	27.9
	Parents	73	14.2
	Relatives/friends	92	17.8
Duration of the practical training	8 weeks	302	58.8
	8-12 weeks	109	21.2
	13-15 weeks	62	12.1
	One semester+	41	8.0

Findings based on objectives

The Extent to Which FPT programmes provide students with an environment to learn about their intended business occupation

The findings indicate that FPT programmes positively and significantly provided trainees with opportunities to learn about the intended business occupations. Using the t-test, the findings support the hypothesis that the FPT programme provision enhances students with opportunities to learn about the intended business occupation through practical work experience. The mean values, t-values as well as p-values as presented in respective brackets for each business occupation item, indicate that FPT had improved trainees accounting related skills (μ=3.93, t=19.473, p=0.000), improved trainees' financial management skills (μ=3.92, t=19.903, p=0.000), improved trainees' business management related skills (μ=3.88, t=18.503, p=0.000). It had improved marketing related skills (μ=3.79, t=15.958, p=0.000), improved trainees banking related skills (μ=3.61, t=11.228, p=0.000). The findings further indicate that FPT had improved trainees' human resource management-related skills (μ=3.46, t=9.178, p=0.000), improved trainees' procurement-related skills (μ=3.32, t=6.143, p=0.000), and FPT has improved my hospitality and tourism management skills (μ=3.2, t=3.537, p=0.000)—table 2 details.

Table 2

FPT Programmes Provide Students with an Opportunity to Learn about Their Intended Business Occupation

One-Sample Statistics (Test Value = 3)					
Statement	**N**	**Mean (μ)**	**t**	**Sig. (2-tailed)**	**Mean Ranking**
FPT has improved my accounting-related skills	512	3.93	19.473	0.000	1
FPT has improved my financial management skills	511	3.92	19.903	0.000	2
FPT has improved my business management-related skills	510	3.88	18.503	0.000	3
FPT has improved my marketing-related skills	511	3.79	15.958	0.000	4
FPT has improved my banking-related skills	512	3.61	11.228	0.000	5
FPT has improved my human resource management skills	512	3.46	9.178	0.000	6
FPT has improved my procurement-related skills	512	3.32	6.143	0.000	7
FPT has improved my hospitality and tourism management skills	512	3.2	3.537	0.000	8

Development of students' practical skills through FPT

The findings on the extent to which FPT attended by university students were capable of developing appropriate and relevant students' practical skills indicate a positive and significant capability of FPT in developing such skills. Using a t-test, this study thus accepted the second hypothesis, *H2, that HLI students attending FPT were capable of developing appropriate and relevant practical skills.* As presented in Table 3, the mean values, t-values as well and p-values as presented in respective brackets for each practical skill item, indicate that FPT had improved trainees accounting related skills (μ=3.93, t=19.473, p=0.000), improved customer care skills (μ=4.42, t=34.522, p=0.000), improved time management skills (μ=4.38, t=37.068, p=0.000), improved teamwork skills (μ=4.35, t=35.664, p=0.000), improved my communication skills (μ=4.21, t=28.762, p=0.000). Also, FPT had improved trainees critical thinking skills (μ=4.1, t=27.853, p=0.000), improved trainees reporting skills (μ=4.09, t=26.283, p=0.000), improved trainees networking skills ((μ=4.09, t=26.342, p=0.000), and improved trainees decision-making skills (μ=4.07, t=26.88, p=0.000). The FPT was reported to have improved negotiation skills (μ=4.07, t=25.62, p=0.000), improved trainees' creativity skills (μ=4.06, t=26.278, p=0.000), improved trainees' empathy skills (μ=4, t=23.649, p=0.000), improved computer skills (μ=3.93, t=19.83, p=0.000), improved trainees leadership skills (μ=3.93, t=21.986, p=0.000), improved trainees problem solving (μ=3.92, t=22.712, p=0.000), improved trainees public speaking (μ=3.9, t=20.262, p=0.000), improved delegation skills (μ=3.81, t=20.136, p=0.000).

Table 3

Effectiveness of FPT in Developing Students' Practical and Soft Skills

One-Sample Statistics (Test Value = 3)					
Statement	**N**	**Mean (μ)**	**t**	**Sig. (2-tailed)**	**Mean Ranking**
FPT has improved my customer care skills	513	4.42	34.522	0.000	1
FPT has improved my time management skills	512	4.38	37.068	0.000	2
FPT has improved my teamwork skills	513	4.35	35.664	0.000	3
FPT has improved my communication skills	513	4.21	28.762	0.000	4
FPT has improved my critical thinking skills	513	4.1	27.853	0.000	5
FPT has improved my reporting skills	513	4.09	26.283	0.000	6
FPT has improved my networking skills	513	4.09	26.342	0.000	7
FPT has improved my decision-making skills	512	4.07	26.88	0.000	8
FPT has improved my negotiation skills	513	4.07	25.62	0.000	9
FPT has improved my creativity skills	513	4.06	26.278	0.000	10
FPT has improved my empathy skills	513	4	23.649	0.000	11

FPT has improved my computer skills	513	3.93	19.83	0.000	12
FPT has improved my leadership skills	513	3.93	21.986	0.000	13
FPT has improved my problem-solving	513	3.92	22.712	0.000	14
FPT has improved my public speaking	513	3.9	20.262	0.000	15
practical training has improved my delegation skills	512	3.81	20.136	0.000	16

Challenges university students encounter during field practical training

Despite the significance of FPT in developing relevant students' practical skills, trainees reported several challenges that they faced in the pursuit of developing practical skills in business. The challenges are ranked in Table 4, using mean value, t-values and p-values are listed to include: inadequate facilities to support FPT (μ=2.85, t=-2.513, p=0.012); cultural differences between academia and industry (μ=2.82, t=3.022, p=0.003); not assigned to relevant professional activities (μ=2.61, t=-6.24, p=0.000); lacking appreciation of the value of practical training (μ=2.43, t=-9.878, p=0.000); non-supportive practical training supervisors(μ=2.20, t=-13.975, p=0.000); and non-supportive workmates (μ=2.17, t=-15.107, p=0.000) were considered significant challenges.

Across the sectors (private or public), the observed challenges, as presented in Table 5, were related to limited access to office resources (computer files) with t=-2.250 and p-value =.025., with the challenges being severe in public sectors (μ=3.14) as compared to private sectors (μ=2.84). While the challenges were all over across the sectors, the study rejects the null hypothesis H3 that *Across the sector students attended, the challenges are not similar between the public sector than in private sector organisations,* with those in the public sector being more severe than those in the public sector. Trainees also reported inadequate facilities to support practical training as another pressing challenge among the public sector (μ=2.96) as compared to the private sector (μ=2.61) with t-value= – 2.765 and p-value=0.006. Being not assigned to relevant professional activities was also observed as a challenge and is more severe to the public sector (μ=2.71) as compared to the private sector (μ=2.42) with t-value= – 2.143 and p-value=0.033. In other words, across the public and private sectors, the significant challenges in descending order that trainees faced in developing practical skills were related to limited access to office resources (computer files), inadequate facilities to support practical training, and not being assigned to relevant professional activities.

Table 4

Challenges Trainees Encounter During Field Practical Training

One-Sample T-Statistics (Test Value = 3)					
Challenges	**N**	**Mean (μ)**	**t**	**Sig. (2-tailed)**	**Mean Ranking**
Limited access to office resources (computer files)	506	3.04	0.614	0.540	1
Limited access to workplace activities	507	2.98	-0.291	0.771	2
Inadequate facilities to support practical training	507	2.85	-2.513	0.012	3
Cultural differences between academia and industry	507	2.82	-3.022	0.003	4
Not assigned to relevant professional activities	507	2.61	-6.24	0.000	5
Lacking appreciation of the value of practical training	507	2.43	-9.878	0.000	6
Non-supportive practical training supervisors	507	2.20	-13.975	0.000	7
Non-supportive workmates	507	2.17	-15.107	0.000	8

Table 5

Challenges Learners Encounter Across Sectors in Developing Practical Business Skills

	Independent Sample T-test (Test Value = 3)					
Challenge item	**Sector**	**N**	**Mean (μ)**	**t**	**Sig. (2-tailed)**	**Remarks**
Limited access to office resources (e.g. computer files)	Private sector	167	2.83	-1.748	.081	Insignificant
	Public sector	339	3.06			
Limited access to workplace activities	Private sector	167	2.84	-2.250	.025	**Significant**
	Public sector	338	3.14			
Inadequate facilities to support practical training	Private sector	167	2.90	.893	.372	Insignificant
	Public sector	339	2.79			
Cultural differences between academia and industry	Private sector	167	2.61	-2.765	.006	**Significant**
	Public sector	339	2.96			
Not assigned to relevant professional activities	Private sector	167	2.16	-.613	.540	Insignificant
	Public sector	339	2.23			
Lacking appreciation of the value of practical training	Private sector	167	2.11	-.791	.429	Insignificant
	Public sector	339	2.20			
Non-supportive practical training supervisors	Private sector	167	2.42	-2.143	.033	**Significant**
	Public sector	339	2.71			

Non-supportive workmates	Private sector	167	2.32	-1.363	.173	Insignificant
	Public sector	339	2.49			

Discussion

This study was designed to evaluate the extent to which FPT programmes offer students opportunities to learn about their intended business occupations, develop relevant practical and soft skills, and identify challenges students face during field practical training. Using t-statistic tests, the findings support the hypothesis that FPT programmes enhance students' understanding of their intended business occupations through practical work experience. These findings align with Ko and Sidhu (2012), who argue that FPT has significant educational and practical implications across academic disciplines, leading to its implementation in almost all HLIs worldwide (Marijani et al., 2023a). Building on this perspective, Billett et al. (2018) note that HLIs have begun refining FPT programmes after recognising their effectiveness in improving students' workplace understanding and acquiring relevant work experiences.

The findings also support the hypothesis that FPT is capable of developing appropriate and relevant students' practical skills (i.e., hard and soft skills). The hard skills include areas in which students sought to specialise, such as accounting, financial management, business management, marketing, banking, human resources management, procurement, and hospitality and tourism management. Soft skills included skills such as customer care, time management, teamwork, effective communication, public speaking and reporting, critical thinking, leadership, teamwork, time management, leadership and problem-solving, delegation, motivation and adaptability skills. Assessing the potency of FPT in equipping students with soft skills was deemed important. The general understanding has always been that HLIs are unsatisfactorily equipped to transfer soft skills to their undergraduate students (Qizi, 2020). This is what Oizi (2020) argues, despite the generally accepted conclusion that "soft skills are important not only for the labour market but also for a complete human being to achieve happiness in life" (Qizi, 2020). The foregoing claim is in contrast to the findings of those scholars who are questioning the relevance and appropriateness of the FPT in imparting skills and essential attitudes to enhance graduates' employability. For instance, Bassi and Ludwig (2000) argue that FPT is often costly and does not ensure a return on investment (ROI). This realisation has led some host organisations to refrain from investing their resources in enlisting the services of field students.

Notwithstanding the worth with which FPT was capable of offering to trainees, they sought after practical and soft skills; several challenges were noted. A One-Sample T-Statistics test revealed that challenges such as inadequate facilities to

support practical training, cultural differences between academia and industry, not being assigned to relevant professional activities, lacking appreciation of the value of practical training, non-supportive practical training supervisors, and non-supportive workmates were considered significant challenges that impended trainees' acquisition of practical business skills. Yet, across the sectors, the challenges were found to be significantly more severe in the public sector than in private sector organisations.

Specifically, significant differences were observed between private and public sectors in terms of limited access to workplace activities, cultural disparities between academia and industry, and the presence of non-supportive practical training supervisors. Field students are thus poised to acquire more practical business skills interning in the private sector than in the public sector. The differences may stem from several factors, with one notable aspect being that public sector organisations tend to be more bureaucratic and exhibit weaker organisational commitment compared to their private sector counterparts (Sardana et al., 2024; Boyne, 2002). In contrast, private sector organisations operate in an entrepreneurial environment that fosters students' acquisition of practical business skills. As noted by Pereira et al. (2018), private firms prioritise profits as their primary performance measure, whereas public firms focus on substantive purposes, balancing political obligations with service delivery. However, bureaucratic systems in the public sector inhibit learning and impede the acquisition of these skills. This dynamism of the private sector enriches the training of field students, instils the right attitudes towards work, provides appropriate working experiences, and fosters the acquisition of essential skills.

The most significant challenges revealed using the Independent Sample T-test were challenges related to limited access to office resources (computer files), inadequate facilities to support practical training, and not being assigned to relevant professional activities. According to Kavishe (2020), the challenges faced by students while undergoing practical training are "centred around the lack of structure and clear guidance." The challenges noted are corroborated by the findings of Msuya (2022) and Ndibalema and Kambona (2018), who found that field students are denied access to the use of ICT and lacked infrastructural support as they were not trusted to handle some key administrative matters. The findings are also in line with those of scholars such as Shutenko (2015) and Billet et al. (2018), who noted that students are provided with limited access to workplace activities, thus increasing their realisation of their potential.

Likewise, Mgonja (2017) pointed out that the cultural differences between academia and industries are straining the relationship between the two parties and thus generating mistrust as potential partners. Azmi et al. (2019) observed a mismatch between the placement sectors and the courses the students took at the

university, resulting in considerable frustration among students. Consequently, students may perceive that they are not acquiring the necessary job-specific skills during their practical training. While this study identifies non-supportive practical training supervisors as a significant challenge to skills acquisition, Kavishe (2020) argues that a sense of support from the hosting department is crucial for interns as it enhances their learning experience. Lastly, consistent with the findings of this study, Sjoo & Hellstrom (2019) identified inadequate resources to support practical training activities as another significant challenge.

This study thus argues in line with Adu-Yeboh (2022) that mere participation in FPT does not guarantee that one will acquire and develop the competencies expected. Rather, it is the acquisition of the right knowledge, skills and attitudes that counts in the production of highly skilled human capital. In line with the Human Capital Theory, unless FPT students are acquainted with practical training, they can hardly deliver high-quality professional services in increasingly complex, social, and technological environments. Similarly, they would not be able to offer specialised skills relevant to the dynamic job market, and vice versa is true (Marijani et al., 2023a).

Conclusions and Study Implications

The findings of this study underscore the growing recognition of the FPT in equipping undergraduate students with essential practical and soft skills. While this is encouraging, the challenges highlighted in this study necessitate concerted efforts from all involved parties (students, host institutions, and HLIs) to acknowledge and appreciate the significance of practical training in preparing students for the labour market. Notably, Qizi (2020) emphasises the importance of equipping students with soft skills during their time at universities or colleges, as these skills are crucial for employability and career success. This realisation should also help prompt host institutions and universities to allocate sufficient financial and administrative resources to ensure that students' skill sets align with the demands of the labour market.

Furthermore, it is vital to recognise the collaborative efforts of the government, particularly through the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology and the Prime Minister's Office: Labour, Youth, Employment & Persons with Disability, which should enact policies to mandate both the private and public sectors to admit a significant number of students for practical training. Host institutions should view this collaboration as being mutually beneficial, as it would ensure the provided FPT are effective enough to produce graduates who are well-prepared to seize employment opportunities in the job market and deliver as expected. Given the current ad hoc arrangements for FPTs and the varying approaches across universities, it is recommended that HLIs, through the TCU, develop comprehensive FPT policy

guidelines and regularly review them to ensure alignment with industry needs. Additionally, both HLIs and host organisations should allocate more financial resources to support field-based practical training.

Limitations and Areas for Further Studies

This study has been conducted among university students enrolled in business-related degree programmes. Future research endeavours should extend beyond this and include students from other disciplines, such as engineering, education, economics, sociology, and many more, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand and the generalizability of the findings and recommendations. Likewise, relying solely on data from students who have not yet graduated may compromise the validity of the results. Moreover, more studies should encompass alumnae who have already graduated from HLIs and are currently working. This will help explain better the relevance of the practical and soft skills, attitudes, and knowledge gained during training and how applicable they are in the student's current employment duties.

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