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Effects of career guidance, internship experience, emotional intelligence, and soft skills on students' work readiness

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the effects of career guidance, internship experience, emotional intelligence, and soft skills on the work readiness of students at SMKN 7 Sijunjung. This study employed a quantitative correlational design involving 73 twelfth-grade students selected using purposive sampling. Data were collected through Likert-scale questionnaires and analyzed using descriptive statistics, assumption tests, simple and multiple regression analyses, t-tests, F-tests, and coefficients of determination. The results revealed that career guidance, internship experience, emotional intelligence, and soft skills each had positive and significant effects on work readiness, contributing 21.6%, 35.3%, 20.2%, and 24.7%, respectively. Simultaneously, these variables explained 46.2% of the variance in work readiness. These findings indicate that strengthening educational support and personal competencies is essential for enhancing vocational students' readiness for employment.



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Introduction

Work readiness has become one of the principal indicators of vocational education quality because vocational schools are expected to produce graduates who are capable of entering and adapting to increasingly dynamic labor markets (Alharethi et al., 2025; Doan & Vu, 2026). In Indonesia, the transition from school to employment remains a major challenge as many vocational graduates experience difficulties aligning their competencies with industry expectations. The acceleration of digital transformation, technological innovation, and changing workplace structures has shifted employers' recruitment priorities from technical competence alone toward a combination of technical expertise, career adaptability, interpersonal competence, and lifelong learning capacity. From the perspective of human capital theory, work readiness is developed through the accumulation of educational experiences, practical exposure, and individual competencies that collectively enhance graduates' employability (Bisschoff & Massyn, 2025; Musa et al., 2025; Wilopo et al., 2025). Therefore, understanding the determinants of work readiness has become increasingly important for improving the effectiveness of vocational education.

Previous studies have consistently identified career guidance and internship experience as important educational factors influencing students' work readiness. Career guidance assists students in understanding their interests, identifying occupational opportunities, strengthening career decision-making, and developing career adaptability, all of which facilitate the transition from school to employment (Pantaruk et al., 2025; Pohan et al., 2026; Wahyuni et al., 2026). Likewise, internship experience provides authentic workplace exposure that

enables students to apply classroom knowledge, understand organizational culture, and develop professional competencies required by industry (Febriyana et al., 2023; Syafira & Umam, 2024; Syawitri et al., 2024). Nevertheless, previous findings also suggest that the effectiveness of career guidance and internship programs varies depending on the quality of implementation, institutional support, and students' engagement during the learning process, indicating that these educational interventions may not contribute equally across different vocational settings.

Besides educational support, individual competencies have also been recognized as fundamental determinants of work readiness. Emotional intelligence enables students to regulate emotions, manage workplace stress, build interpersonal relationships, and respond constructively to occupational challenges. Similarly, soft skills including communication, teamwork, adaptability, problem-solving, and professional ethics have become essential employability competencies because modern organizations increasingly value collaborative and adaptive employees. Numerous studies have demonstrated positive relationships between emotional intelligence, soft skills, and employability (Aryono et al., 2026; Ningsih & Ramadhani, 2025; Pramestie & Prabowo, 2025; Putri & Sulistiobudi, 2024). However, the reported magnitude of these relationships differs across studies, suggesting that the contribution of personal competencies to work readiness may depend on educational context and learner characteristics.

Despite the growing body of literature, several important research gaps remain. Most previous studies have examined career guidance, internship experience, emotional intelligence, or soft skills separately, or have focused on only one or two predictors of work readiness. Consequently, limited empirical evidence explains how educational support factors and personal competencies simultaneously contribute to vocational students' work readiness within a single explanatory model, particularly in Indonesian vocational education contexts (Ramli et al., 2025; Utami & Raharjo, 2020; Wiguna & Saragih, 2025). Furthermore, relatively few studies have been conducted in regional vocational schools, where educational resources, industry collaboration, and students' employment opportunities may differ from those of urban institutions. These limitations indicate the need for a more comprehensive investigation that integrates multiple determinants of work readiness.

This study addresses these gaps by simultaneously examining the effects of career guidance, internship experience, emotional intelligence, and soft skills on the work readiness of students at SMKN 7 Sijunjung, Indonesia. Rather than evaluating each predictor independently, this study develops an integrated framework that combines school-based educational support and individual competencies to explain vocational students' readiness for employment. This approach is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how these factors interact in shaping work readiness and to extend existing evidence beyond studies that have examined these variables in isolation (Ahmid et al., 2023; Hora & Lee, 2024; Prickett et al., 2025).

Accordingly, the novelty of this study lies not only in the simultaneous examination of four key determinants of work readiness within a single empirical model but also in providing evidence from an Indonesian regional vocational school context that has received limited scholarly attention. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically by strengthening the multidimensional perspective of work readiness that integrates educational experiences and personal competencies, while also offering practical implications for vocational schools in designing career guidance services, improving internship quality, and developing students' emotional and soft skills to enhance graduate employability in an increasingly competitive labor market.

Method

This study employed a quantitative correlational research design to examine the relationships between career guidance, internship experience, emotional intelligence, soft skills, and students' work readiness. The research was conducted at SMKN 7 Sijunjung, West Sumatra, Indonesia, during the second semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. The participants consisted of all 73 twelfth-grade students from the Computer and Network Engineering, Motorcycle Engineering, and Culinary programs who had completed their industrial internship. Because the entire accessible population met the inclusion criteria and participated in the study, a total sampling technique was employed. The study investigated career guidance (X_1), internship experience (X_2), emotional intelligence (X_3), and soft skills (X_4) as independent variables, with work readiness (Y) as the dependent variable.

Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire developed from established theoretical frameworks and previous empirical studies relevant to each construct. All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Career guidance was assessed through self-understanding, career planning, career information, career decision-making, career adaptability, and interpersonal skills; internship experience through technical competence, interpersonal skills, work adaptation, time management, and problem-solving; emotional intelligence through self-awareness, self-management, self-motivation, empathy, and social skills; and soft skills through communication, teamwork, discipline, self-

confidence, ethics, honesty, and personal attitudes. Work readiness was measured using indicators of work knowledge, occupational skills, work attitudes, adaptability, communication, self-confidence, and problem-solving. Instrument validity was evaluated using Pearson's Product-Moment correlation, while internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with all constructs meeting the acceptable validity and reliability criteria before hypothesis testing.

Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 27. Descriptive statistics were first used to summarize respondents' characteristics and variable distributions. Assumption tests, including normality (Kolmogorov-Smirnov), linearity, multicollinearity (Tolerance and VIF), and heteroscedasticity tests, were conducted to ensure that the regression assumptions were satisfied. After all assumptions were fulfilled, Pearson correlation analysis was employed to examine bivariate relationships, followed by simple and multiple linear regression analyses to determine the individual and simultaneous effects of the independent variables on work readiness. Statistical significance was established at the 0.05 level, and the coefficient of determination (R^2) was used to estimate the proportion of variance in work readiness explained by the proposed model.

Results and Discussions

This study examined the effects of career guidance, internship experience, emotional intelligence, and soft skills on students' work readiness at SMKN 7 Sijunjung. Prior to hypothesis testing, assumption tests were conducted to verify the suitability of the data for regression analysis. Subsequently, simple and multiple regression analyses were performed to determine the individual and simultaneous contributions of the independent variables to work readiness. The results of the analyses are presented in the following tables.

Table 1. Results of Assumption Testing

Assumption Test	Indicator	Value	Criterion	Decision
Normality	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Sig.	0.250	$p > 0.05$	Normal distribution
Linearity (Career Guidance-Work Readiness)	Deviation from Linearity Sig.	0.307	$p > 0.05$	Linear
Linearity (Internship Experience-Work Readiness)	Deviation from Linearity Sig.	0.254	$p > 0.05$	Linear
Linearity (Emotional Intelligence-Work Readiness)	Deviation from Linearity Sig.	0.239	$p > 0.05$	Linear
Linearity (Soft Skills-Work Readiness)	Deviation from Linearity Sig.	0.430	$p > 0.05$	Linear
Multicollinearity	Tolerance	0.903-0.998	> 0.10	No multicollinearity
Multicollinearity	VIF	1.002-1.107	< 10	No multicollinearity

The assumption testing demonstrated that the dataset satisfied all prerequisites for regression analysis. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test yielded a significance value of 0.250 ($p > 0.05$), indicating that the residuals were normally distributed. Likewise, the significance values for deviation from linearity ranged from 0.239 to 0.430, all exceeding the threshold of 0.05, confirming linear relationships between the independent variables and work readiness. Furthermore, tolerance values above 0.10 and VIF values below 10 indicated the absence of multicollinearity among the predictors. Therefore, the data were appropriate for subsequent hypothesis testing.

Table 2. Correlation Analysis between Independent Variables and Work Readiness

Variable	R	Interpretation	R^2	Contribution (%)
Career Guidance	0.463	Moderate	0.216	21.6
Internship Experience	0.594	Moderate to Strong	0.353	35.3
Emotional Intelligence	0.243	Weak	0.202	20.2
Soft Skills	0.497	Moderate	0.247	24.7

The correlation analysis revealed that all independent variables were positively associated with students' work readiness. Internship experience demonstrated the strongest relationship with work readiness ($R = 0.594$), accounting for 35.3% of the variance in work readiness. This was followed by soft skills ($R = 0.497$; 24.7%),

career guidance ($R = 0.463$; 21.6%), and emotional intelligence ($R = 0.243$; 20.2%). These findings indicate that improvements in career-related support, industrial experiences, emotional competencies, and interpersonal abilities are associated with higher levels of readiness to enter the workforce.

Table 3. Summary of Simple Regression Analyses Predicting Students' Work Readiness

Predictor	Regression Equation	B	t	p	Contribution (R^2 , %)
Career Guidance	$\hat{Y} = 100.529 + 0.327X_1$	0.327	2.223	<0.001	21.6
Internship Experience	$\hat{Y} = 104.532 + 2.653X_2$	2.653	3.505	<0.001	35.3
Emotional Intelligence	$\hat{Y} = 98.685 + 0.144X_3$	0.144	2.363	<0.001	20.2
Soft Skills	$\hat{Y} = 92.330 + 0.166X_4$	0.166	2.422	<0.001	24.7

The simple regression analyses demonstrated that all independent variables positively and significantly predicted students' work readiness ($p < 0.001$). Internship experience exhibited the largest contribution, explaining 35.3% of the variance in work readiness and producing the highest regression coefficient ($B = 2.653$; $t = 3.505$). This was followed by soft skills ($R^2 = 24.7\%$; $B = 0.166$; $t = 2.422$), career guidance ($R^2 = 21.6\%$; $B = 0.327$; $t = 2.223$), and emotional intelligence ($R^2 = 20.2\%$; $B = 0.144$; $t = 2.363$). These findings indicate that improvements in educational support and personal competencies are associated with higher levels of students' readiness to enter the labor market.

Table 4. Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Work Readiness

Model Summary

R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	F	p
0.710	0.462	0.421	2.711	0.000

Regression Coefficients

Predictor	B	Beta	t	p
Constant	105.141		4.746	0.000
Career Guidance	0.173	0.057	0.451	0.000
Internship Experience	0.193	0.085	0.675	0.000
Emotional Intelligence	0.256	0.046	0.388	0.000
Soft Skills	0.294	0.071	0.578	0.000

Regression equation:

$$\hat{Y} = 105.141 + 0.173X_1 + 0.193X_2 + 0.256X_3 + 0.294X_4$$

The multiple regression analysis revealed that career guidance, internship experience, emotional intelligence, and soft skills collectively had a positive and significant effect on students' work readiness ($F = 2.711$, $p < 0.001$). The multiple correlation coefficient ($R = 0.710$) indicated a strong relationship between the four predictors and work readiness. The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.462$) demonstrated that the model explained 46.2% of the variance in work readiness, while the remaining 53.8% was attributable to factors outside the present model. Among the predictors, internship experience contributed the largest individual effect, followed by soft skills, career guidance, and emotional intelligence. These findings suggest that students' work readiness is a multidimensional construct that develops through the integration of industrial experiences, career preparation, emotional competencies, and interpersonal skills.

To provide a clearer representation of the relationships among the variables investigated in this study, Figure 1 presents the structural model illustrating the effects of career guidance, internship experience, emotional intelligence, and soft skills on students' work readiness. The figure summarizes the individual contributions of each predictor as well as their simultaneous effect on work readiness. As shown in the model, internship experience demonstrated the largest contribution to work readiness ($R^2 = 35.3\%$), followed by soft skills ($R^2 = 24.7\%$), career guidance ($R^2 = 21.6\%$), and emotional intelligence ($R^2 = 20.2\%$). Furthermore, the four variables collectively explained 46.2% of the variance in students' work readiness ($R^2 = 0.462$), indicating that work readiness is a multidimensional construct influenced by experiential, psychological, and interpersonal factors.

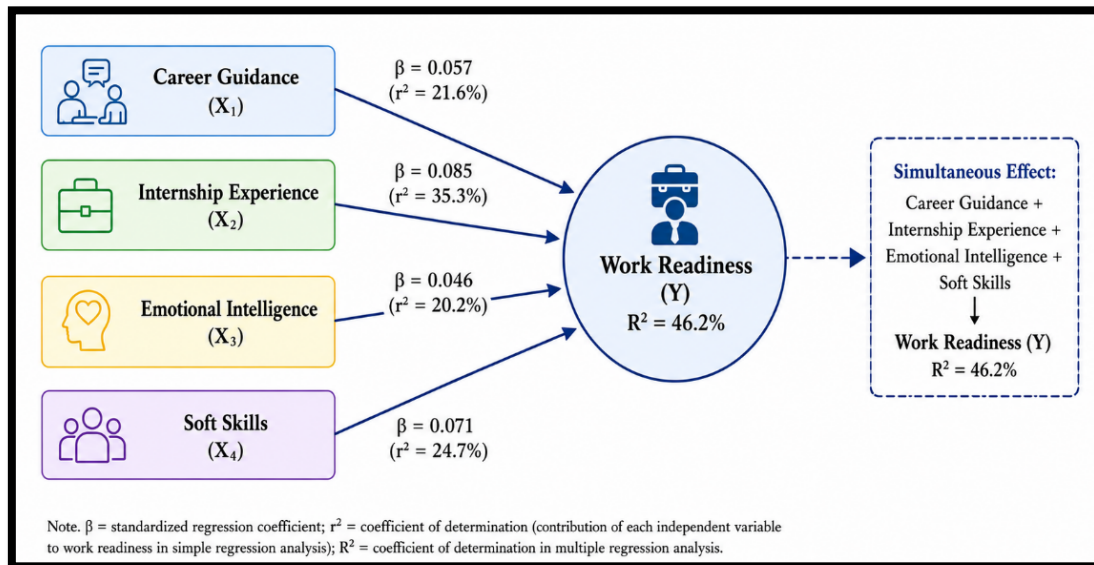


Figure 1. Structural Model of the Effects of Independent Variables on Work Readiness

The findings demonstrate that career guidance, internship experience, emotional intelligence, and soft skills collectively exert a significant influence on students' work readiness, with the proposed model explaining 46.2% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.462$). This result indicates that work readiness is a multidimensional construct shaped by the interaction between educational support and individual competencies, while the remaining 53.8% suggests that additional factors outside the model also contribute to students' preparedness for employment. Within the context of Indonesian vocational education, these findings reinforce the perspective of human capital theory, which emphasizes that employability develops through the accumulation of knowledge, practical experience, and personal competencies (Avleeva et al., 2025; Endeli et al., 2025; Fahriati et al., 2024; Laia & Prabowo, 2026).

Among the predictors, internship experience showed the largest contribution ($R^2 = 0.353$; $B = 2.653$), indicating that authentic workplace exposure plays a central role in preparing students for employment. Industrial internships enable students to apply classroom knowledge, understand workplace culture, strengthen technical competence, and develop professional behaviour that cannot be fully achieved through classroom instruction alone. This finding is consistent with previous studies reporting that work-based learning improves employability and school-to-work transition; however, its effectiveness depends on the quality of supervision, learning experiences, and collaboration between schools and industry (Azizah et al., 2021; Imjai et al., 2024).

Soft skills ($R^2 = 0.247$; $B = 0.166$) and career guidance ($R^2 = 0.216$; $B = 0.327$) also made meaningful contributions to work readiness. Communication, teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving skills enable students to respond effectively to workplace demands, whereas career guidance supports career planning, occupational awareness, and informed career decision-making. These findings are consistent with previous studies, although differences in the magnitude of the effects across studies suggest that institutional support, curriculum implementation, and the quality of career services may influence the effectiveness of these educational interventions (Anilkumar et al., 2026; Belousov et al., 2024; Daniel et al., 2026; Abdelhamid & Roberts, 2026; Chhabada et al., 2025; Emelianova et al., 2025; Godoi et al., 2024).

Emotional intelligence contributed positively to work readiness ($R^2 = 0.202$; $B = 0.144$), although its effect was smaller than the other predictors. This finding suggests that emotional competence primarily functions as a supporting factor that helps students regulate emotions, manage workplace pressure, and build productive interpersonal relationships, while practical workplace experience and transferable skills exert a more direct influence on employment readiness. The result is consistent with previous evidence linking emotional intelligence to career adaptability and professional performance, although its contribution may vary across educational contexts and student characteristics (Flores & Gorbett, 2025; Luna et al., 2025; Oktaviana et al., 2026; Rowe et al., 2024).

The findings highlight that improving vocational students' work readiness requires an integrated educational strategy that combines high-quality internship programmes, effective career guidance, and systematic development of emotional intelligence and soft skills. Theoretically, this study strengthens the multidimensional perspective of work readiness by demonstrating that educational experiences and personal competencies jointly explain students' readiness for employment. Nevertheless, because the model accounted for only 46.2% of the

variance, future studies should incorporate additional variables, such as self-efficacy, career motivation, family support, technical competence, and school–industry partnerships, to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of work readiness in vocational education.

Conclusions

This study concludes that career guidance, internship experience, emotional intelligence, and soft skills each have a positive and significant effect on the work readiness of students at SMKN 7 Sijunjung, both individually and simultaneously. Among these factors, internship experience demonstrated the largest contribution to work readiness, followed by soft skills, career guidance, and emotional intelligence. Collectively, these variables explained 46.2% of the variance in students' work readiness, indicating that vocational students' preparedness for employment is shaped by the integration of educational support and individual competencies. Therefore, vocational schools need to strengthen career guidance services, optimize the implementation of industrial internships, and systematically develop students' emotional and soft skills to produce graduates who are competent, adaptive, and prepared to meet the demands of the labor market.

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