

Analysis of the Psychological Well-being of Higher Vocational College Students During Internship Placement

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Abstract: Drawing on a survey of the mental health status of internship-placement students in a higher vocational college and an analysis of its findings, this paper argues that it is necessary for higher vocational institutions to pay greater attention to students' psychological well-being during their internship period. Efforts should be made from three dimensions, that are, students themselves, schools, and enterprises, to strengthen awareness, promote multi-party collaboration, and ensure seamless and comprehensive support for students' mental health development.

Keywords: Higher Vocational Colleges; Internship Placement; Psychological Health; Comprehensive Support.

1. Introduction

In 2019, the Ministry of Education issued the Opinions on Strengthening and Regulating Internship Management in Ordinary Undergraduate Institutions (Jiaogaohan [2019] No. 12), which explicitly states that internships constitute an essential component of practical teaching in higher education. Higher vocational colleges serve as core institutions for cultivating technical and skilled personnel, and internship placement provides a crucial period for students to transform theoretical knowledge into practical operational competence. The industry-education integration model adopted by higher vocational institutions has greatly enhanced students' employability and job readiness. Internship placements benefit schools, enterprises, and students alike; therefore, vocational colleges of all types attach considerable importance to this stage of talent training.[1]

However, in recent years, students have increasingly encountered various psychological problems during their internships, with some cases escalating into psychological crises. These issues have resulted in students failing to complete internship tasks, or frequently changing internship positions without gaining meaningful experience. Consequently, it has become essential for higher vocational institutions to closely track the dynamic psychological state and genuine needs of internship-placement students, and to offer timely and targeted psychological intervention services. Only by doing so can institutions effectively address students' core concerns and fulfill the responsibilities of psychological health education during the internship period.[2]

2. Causes of Psychological Problems Among Students During Internship Placement

2.1. Individual Factors

2.1.1. Lack of Clear Self-Positioning

Many students in higher vocational colleges have relatively weak academic foundations before entering college. They often lack in-depth reflection when selecting a major or planning their career paths, resulting in a substantial gap between their expectations and reality. Prior to their

internships, students generally expect positions that offer high salaries, stability, respectability, and promising career prospects. However, once the internship begins, many discover that the work is repetitive, monotonous, and unchallenging. Others feel that the salary does not meet their expectations or complain about harsh working conditions.

They frequently overlook the fact that the primary purpose of internship placement is to improve their professional competence. Their unclear self-understanding and misconceptions about the nature of internship placements contribute directly to psychological frustration and maladjustment.[3]

2.1.2. Poor Adaptability

Students born after 2000 grew up in an open, rapidly developing society, which has deeply shaped their psychology, mindset, and values. This generation places strong emphasis on personal growth and self-worth, is highly attentive to their emotional states, and tends to consider their feelings first when encountering difficulties.

At the same time, having been raised in relatively comfortable economic and living conditions, they often have higher expectations for quality of life. In contrast, internship workplaces and dormitory facilities are often simple or even rudimentary, creating a sharp gap that many students struggle to adapt to immediately.

During the internship period, students assume dual roles, they remain students who have yet to complete their studies but also become employees of the enterprise. Consequently, they must not only follow the school's rules and regulations but also comply with the company's management and work arrangements. Strict enterprise regulations and demanding working environments often exceed what students are accustomed to, making adaptation difficult and fostering feelings of anxiety, depression, or resistance.

2.1.3. Disharmonious Interpersonal Relationships

Survey findings indicate that common psychological problems experienced by internship-placement students include: lack of skills for resolving interpersonal conflicts, lack of methods for effective collaboration, and insufficient communication skills when interacting with supervisors. These issues are closely linked to students' limited interpersonal coping abilities.

A high proportion of the “post-2000” generation are only children, many of whom had little prior experience with collective living before entering university. Within the campus environment, their social circles primarily comprise peers of similar age, and interactions are typically smooth due to shared interests and minimal conflicts of interest. Teachers, moreover, are generally patient in providing guidance.[4]

In contrast, during internship placements, students interact mostly with older employees. Age differences often create communication barriers, making it difficult to form close friendships, and consequently increasing feelings of isolation. This mismatch in social environment significantly influences their psychological well-being.

2.2. School Level

2.2.1. Neglect of Student Interns in Full-Position Practice

Most universities focus their mental health assessment efforts primarily on first-year students each year, using psychological evaluation tools to understand freshmen’s mental health status and provide timely counseling. However, there is a lack of understanding of the mental health conditions of third-year students who are about to graduate, especially those participating in full-position internships, who receive insufficient attention. This group of students has its own particularities: they are facing a transition from being students to becoming members of the workforce, and a shift in their living environment from campus to society. These changes in identity and environment impose a sense of responsibility on them and, consequently, bring pressure. Graduation also places students at another crossroads in life, where choices about the future become pressing concerns. As these students confront changes in identity, environment, and future planning, the pressure they experience naturally increases.[5]

However, higher vocational institutions tend to focus their efforts on professional development, curriculum design, and the optimization of teaching content when formulating talent-training programs. Their goal is to help students accumulate professional knowledge and enhance practical skills. In contrast, far less attention is given to potential mental health issues students may encounter during their internship and graduation stages.

2.2.2. Insufficient Education for Full-Position Internship Preparation

Common issues reported by full-position internship students fall into several categories. One type concerns dissatisfaction with the workload, as many students feel overwhelmed. Some students struggle to adapt to enterprises’ “three-shift system,” believing that long working hours and strict demands for zero mistakes cause mental tension, physical exhaustion, and heavy work burdens. A second concern involves low wages. Some students feel that since they perform the same tasks as full-time employees, they should receive “equal pay for equal work,” without considering that their familiarity with the job and level of technical skill are actually far below those of regular employees. A third concern is that the work assigned is monotonous and repetitive. Students often feel that their tasks are unrelated to their major, such as e-commerce majors being assigned to answer customer calls, or software design majors being asked to write marketing copy. Many students believe that their internship tasks do not align with their field of study and that such work could be learned in just a few hours, making it unnecessary to stay in the enterprise for the entire

internship period.

When students raise these problems, schools often fail to provide adequate attention and lack necessary preparation education before full-position internships begin. In designing training programs, higher vocational institutions usually prioritize professional development, curriculum reform, and the updating of teaching content, but neglect the cultivation of students’ professional qualities, cultural literacy, and cognitive development. Psychological education during the internship period is also largely overlooked. Particularly in the stage of full-position internships, psychological counseling and intervention are nearly absent. When students encounter various difficulties or confusion during internships, their first instinct is still to seek help from their counselors. Yet counselors are often unable to immediately travel to the internship site to understand the actual situation. As a result, they cannot provide comprehensive guidance nor effectively resolve the students’ real and pressing problems.

2.3. Enterprise Level

2.3.1. Inadequate Management

Once students enter enterprises to begin their internships, they appear to hold both identities—as students and as employees. In reality, however, they receive neither direct supervision from their schools nor structured support from specialized teams within the enterprise. Thus, the management of student interns is effectively left without a clearly responsible party. Most enterprises lack explicit regulations and clearly defined responsibilities regarding the management of interns. Because student interns possess a dual identity as both learners and temporary workers, management systems originally designed for formal employees are often ineffective in regulating student behavior and fail to form a closed-loop management mechanism.

2.3.2. Misconceptions in Enterprise Thinking

Enterprises that partner with vocational colleges are usually strictly selected to ensure students’ rights and safety. Most such enterprises rely on rigorous management systems and effective incentive mechanisms to stimulate employees’ motivation. However, a minority of enterprises, in an effort to reduce costs, treat interns as cheap labor. They not only ignore students’ mental health needs but even disregard national labor regulations by arbitrarily extending working hours and failing to provide necessary labor protections. Such practices have a significantly negative impact on the management of student internships.

In addition, some enterprise employees assume that student interns should be “skilled workers.” They ridicule or belittle students when they ask questions or struggle with unfamiliar professional skills or procedures. This leads to students developing fear or anxiety toward their work tasks. Although enterprises generally value students’ professional qualities and corporate culture adaptation and usually arrange relevant training, they often fail to provide sufficient guidance in shaping students’ mindset and occupational attitudes.

3. Psychological Health Strategies for Students During Full-Position Internships

3.1. Individual Level

3.1.1. Transforming Cognition

When students begin their internships, they should

promptly shift their mindset and actively transition from the role of a student to that of a workplace participant. They need to recognize the significance of their current work, understand the responsibilities they should undertake, become familiar with the enterprise's expectations for their positions, and appreciate the importance of full-position internships for their professional development. Students should work to change their employment mindset, adopt a positive attitude, clarify their self-positioning, make reasonable plans, ground themselves in basic work, and promote their own rapid progress.

3.1.2. Enhancing Personal Competence

Contemporary society increasingly demands versatile talents with strong overall qualities and professional skills. Therefore, during the internship, students should take initiative in training and improving their abilities in communication, problem analysis and resolution, responding to unexpected situations, and teamwork, while actively acquiring knowledge to enhance their professional competence. When encountering difficulties at work, they should seek guidance from experienced employees. With a humble and diligent attitude, students can build solid foundations by starting from basic tasks, which will benefit their future employment.

3.1.3. Learning Self-Regulation

A full-position internship is only a small stage in an individual's growth trajectory, and students should view their current situation rationally. Even if temporary discomfort arises, they can actively seek external support and engage in self-regulation. By adopting a positive perspective toward difficulties, exploring multiple channels to find solutions, and leveraging various resources to overcome challenges, students can maintain the courage and resilience needed to solve problems and overcome difficulties.

3.2. School Level

3.2.1. Strengthening Mental Health Education for Students During Internship Preparation

Existing mental health courses offered by schools are typically concentrated in the first year of study and mainly focus on issues and interventions related to students' campus experiences. Psychological challenges that may emerge during full-position internships and the corresponding guidance strategies are rarely included in the curriculum. Therefore, schools should attach importance to this aspect by providing early psychological intervention regarding potential issues students may face during internships. This helps students build psychological readiness in advance and equips them to prevent and address problems proactively. Mental health education should also be integrated into professional courses, with case studies of psychological issues encountered during internships used to support instruction and guide students in viewing such challenges from the perspective of professional growth.

3.2.2. Establishing a Comprehensive Support System

Schools should build a comprehensive support system and be fully involved in students' psychological development throughout the entire internship process. Professional teachers should lead student groups into enterprises, gain an in-depth understanding of job responsibilities, strengthen communication with enterprise HR departments, and obtain detailed information regarding job requirements, working environments, and rotational schedules. This enables them to

conduct effective psychological preparation for students before the internship begins. Counselors should closely monitor students' psychological states during the internship, organizing case discussions, graduate salons, and interviews with enterprise supervisors to enhance students' psychological resilience and foster multi-party collaboration. Mental health teachers should formulate psychological crisis response plans, provide one-on-one support for students with weak psychological adaptability, those previously identified for special attention, or those displaying abnormal behaviors, helping them cope with negative emotions and ensuring their physical and mental safety. When necessary, schools should handle serious situations scientifically and promptly, including making timely referrals. Additionally, informing parents of relevant matters helps students build stronger social support networks. Schools may also establish online communities to encourage mutual support among students.

3.3. Enterprise Level

3.3.1. Optimizing the Environment and Strengthening Management

At the beginning of their internships, students often struggle to integrate quickly due to unfamiliarity with the enterprise environment and work tasks. At this stage, enterprises should provide targeted training, clearly explaining the core elements of corporate culture, the specific work procedures, and the wage and benefits system. Such training helps students quickly understand business workflows and enter an operational state, enhancing their confidence and sense of belonging within the enterprise. During the internship, experienced employees should be assigned as mentors to guide students, offering patience, care, and sufficient time for adaptation. Students should be encouraged to take initiative, and their early mistakes should be tolerated. Enterprises should also ensure that students' daily living needs are met while they are interning.

3.3.2. Clarifying Responsibilities and Fulfilling Obligations

In managing student internships, enterprises should refine relevant regulations and adopt differentiated approaches for this special group, firmly prohibiting any disguised exploitation of interns. Enterprises must clearly define their supervisory responsibilities and promptly report and handle any abnormal situations involving interns. Effective communication should be maintained with schools, supervising teachers, and counselors, creating a strong support system that helps students adapt more efficiently and successfully complete their internships.

As the most critical component of practical training in vocational education, the smooth progression of full-position internships relies on the effective management of students' psychological well-being. Only through such efforts can vocational students enter society with a healthy mindset and achieve a truly "seamless transition."

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