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THE DIGITAL BRIDGE TO EMPLOYABILITY: A MODERATED MEDIATION ANALYSIS OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING, DIGITAL SKILL, AND SELF-EFFICACY ON WORK READINESS

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THE DIGITAL BRIDGE TO EMPLOYABILITY: A MODERATED MEDIATION ANALYSIS OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING, DIGITAL SKILL, AND SELF-EFFICACY ON WORK READINESS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Experiential Learning contributes to Employability among Indonesian university students, testing the mediating role of Digital Skill and clarifying conceptual ambiguity regarding potential moderation effects. While the direct pathway is robust, inconsistent evidence regarding psychological moderators leaves the boundary conditions of this crucial educational relationship unresolved. A cross-sectional survey of 469 Indonesian university students with internship experience was conducted, analyzed using structural equation modeling. Results show Experiential Learning significantly enhances Work Readiness directly and indirectly via Digital Skill. Crucially, the hypothesized moderating role of Self-Efficacy was not supported, and Self-Efficacy had no direct effect on Work Readiness. These findings suggest that the experiential learning pathway operates as a stable, non-conditional mechanism. The study provides clarification on the pathway's robustness, demonstrating that psychological factors may offer limited explanatory value. It highlights the need to prioritize competence-based interventions and continuous improvement of experiential learning environments to boost graduate employability

Keywords: Work Readiness; Experiential Learning; Digital Skill; Self-Efficacy; Moderated Mediation; Graduate Employability

INTRODUCTION

Amidst the highly competitive global economic landscape of the 21st century, the demand for "work-ready talent" has become a key priority for organizations (OECD, 2024). Consequently, higher education institutions (HEIs) are under immense pressure not only to confer degrees but also to ensure their graduates possess a comprehensive set of attributes. This attribute set is known as Work Readiness, a multidimensional construct encompassing (Enstroem & Schmaltz, 2024; Fugate et al., 2004; Peersia et al., 2024). However, despite this urgency, reports of a persistent "mismatch" between graduate competencies and actual industry demands continue to surface (The future of jobs report, 2025).

This skills mismatch is rooted in long-standing criticisms of the traditional higher education model. Many HEI curricula are criticized for focusing excessively on theoretical knowledge dissemination and rote learning, while neglecting the development of practical and contextual capabilities (Adegbite & Govender, 2021; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021). Consequently, graduates often experience a "reality shock" upon

entering the workforce, where they are expected to adapt rapidly, solve complex problems, and collaborate effectively within teams (Ferry & Westerlund, 2023).

As a strategic response to bridge this theory-practice gap, the Experiential Learning paradigm has been widely adopted (Azeez & Aboobaker, 2024). This approach is increasingly supported by co-creation models and challenge-based learning initiatives that foster collaboration between academia and the labor market to address real-world professional challenges (Amante et al., 2024). Drawing from Kolb, (1984) Experiential Learning Theory, profound and meaningful learning occurs through a four-stage cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that participation in experiential learning programs is one of the strongest predictors of enhanced Work Readiness, as these programs compel students to apply, test, and refine their competencies within authentic professional contexts (Alrazeeni et al., 2021; Shore & Dinning, 2023)

While the positive relationship between Experiential Learning and Work Readiness is well-documented (Shore & Dinning, 2023), modern research has begun to shift from *whether* experiential learning impacts work readiness to the more critical question of *how* this influence occurs (Adegbite, 2024). The process is considerably more complex and contingent upon the specific competencies honed and acquired during the experience (Azeez & Aboobaker, 2024). Therefore, identifying the mediating mechanisms that explain the transformation process from experience to readiness is theoretically and practically crucial for designing effective Experiential Learning programs.

Amid the demands of Industry 4.0 and the digital economy, one of the most logical and crucial mediating mechanisms is Digital Skill. Digital Skill, which encompasses the ability to seek, evaluate, use, and create information using digital technologies (Helsper & Van Laar, 2021), has evolved from a mere IT skill into a foundational language in nearly every modern workplace (Reddy et al., 2023). Experiential Learning programs provide an authentic arena for students to apply, test, and validate their Digital Skill on real-world problems. It is this enhancement of Digital Skill that, in turn, directly contribute to their Work Readiness (Van Laar et al., 2019).

The robustness of this $[X \rightarrow M \rightarrow Y]$ mediation path is no longer a mere theoretical proposition; it has been empirically validated by recent Q1 research. using conceptually identical constructs (Work-Integrated Learning and Digital Literacy, successfully demonstrated that Digital Literacy plays a significant mediating role. This finding (Adegbite, 2024) confirming that Digital Skill (or Literacy) is a critical bridge in the work readiness model. However, this validated model still leaves a significant question unanswered.

While the model successfully answers *how* the mechanism operates, it failed to answer the crucial question of *when* this effect holds true. The effectiveness of Experiential Learning is not universal; its impact likely hinges on specific individual characteristics or conditions. Previous research has attempted to test potential moderators, such as life-career knowledge, namely *Life-Career Knowledge*. However, their findings indicated that this moderation hypothesis failed (was rejected). the model remains incomplete because its true boundary conditions have yet to be identified.

Therefore, this study proposes a moderator that is Self-Efficacy. Drawing from Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), Self-Efficacy is an individual's belief in their capability to succeed in specific tasks. Within this context, Self-Efficacy functions as a psychological filter. Students with high Self-Efficacy will tend to be proactive, persistent, and view challenges during their internship as opportunities, thereby maximizing their impact on Work Readiness.

Based on the identified research gap, this study aims to refine and extend the model proposed by (Adegbite, 2024). Specifically, the objectives are: (1) To confirm the influence of Experiential Learning on

Work Readiness; (2) To confirm the mediating role of Digital Skill in the X-Y relationship within the Indonesian context; and (3) To test the moderating role of Self-Efficacy on the X-Y relationship, which we hypothesize will be significant. Thus, this research will produce a more comprehensive and robust moderated mediation model to explain the determinants of graduate work readiness.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Work Readiness (Y) as a Key Construct

The central construct in this research is Work Readiness. Work Readiness is defined as a multidimensional set of attributes that enables graduates to effectively integrate and contribute within the workplace (Herbert et al., 2020). It is crucial to note that Work Readiness transcends mere technical proficiency (hard skills); it is a holistic construct that also encompasses generic skills (such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving), personal attributes (like professionalism, work ethic, and resilience), and an understanding of organizational expectations and dynamics (Inderanata & Sukardi, 2023; Lawton et al., 2024). Within the context of graduate mismatch, the achievement of high Work Readiness is considered the most critical ultimate outcome of higher education interventions (Sakitri et al., 2024).

Experiential Learning and its Theoretical Foundation

To cultivate such holistic Work Readiness, the most potent pedagogical intervention is Experiential Learning. Experiential Learning (e.g., internships, WIL) is not merely the placement of students in industry; it is an active learning process with a robust theoretical foundation. Its cornerstone is Kolb, (1984) Experiential Learning Theory. Kolb (1984) argued that deep learning occurs through a continuous four-stage cycle: (1) Concrete Experience, (2) Reflective Observation, (3) Abstract Conceptualization, and (4) Active Experimentation. This process affirms that learning is not the passive transfer of knowledge, but rather an active process of "creating knowledge through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984).

The Direct Influence of Experiential Learning on Work Readiness

The relationship between Experiential Learning and Work Readiness can be directly explained via (Kolb (1984) cycle. Experiential Learning programs compel students to exit their passive roles and enter this cycle. They confront Concrete Experiences (e.g., handling client complaints or project deadlines). They must engage in Reflective Observation (Why did my approach fail?). They Conceptualize (comparing classroom theory with reality). And they Experiment (trying new approaches). It is this active process that plays a central role in developing the various dimensions of Work Readiness, from problem-solving to resilience (Lau et al., 2020). Numerous empirical studies have consistently found a positive and significant correlation between participation in WIL/EL and enhanced Graduate Employability or Work Readiness (Adegbite, 2024; Adegbite & Govender, 2021; Mahajan et al., 2022). Furthermore, the adoption of innovative pedagogical methodologies is crucial as it fosters deeper student engagement and promotes the development of critical problem-solving skills necessary for professional success (Amante, 2024). Therefore, the first hypothesis is formulated:

H1: Experiential Learning has a positive and significant influence on Work Readiness.

The first hypothesis (H1) establishes the direct relationship. However, to unpack the "black box" of the X→Y path, its intervening mechanisms must be tested. The first path in this mechanism is the relationship between Experiential Learning and Digital Skill. We argue that Experiential Learning programs

(such as internships) serve as a practical "arena" or "laboratory." It is here that students are compelled to transition from theoretical knowledge of digital tools to practical application in professional contexts (Chonsalasin & Khampirat, 2022). They must utilize collaborative software (e.g., Teams, Slack), project management platforms (e.g., Trello, Asana), or industry-specific data analysis software not taught in the classroom. This intensive "learning by doing" process within EL is what directly hones, validates, and enhances the student's Digital Skill (M) (Hampton et al., 2021). Therefore, the second hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Experiential Learning has a positive and significant influence on Digital Skill (M).

The second path in the mediation mechanism is the relationship between Digital Skill and Work Readiness. In the modern labor market, Digital Skill is no longer considered an optional or specialized competency but rather a fundamental baseline (Adegbite, 2024). Employers across all sectors now assume graduates possess the ability to adapt to new technologies, analyze data, and communicate digitally (Dewi, 2021). These skills directly contribute to Work Readiness by enabling graduates to work more efficiently, contribute to virtual teams, and demonstrate self-directed learning all core attributes that define "work readiness" in the 21st century (Scheepers et al., 2024; McGunagle & Zizka, 2020). Thus, the third hypothesis is:

H3: Digital Skill has a positive and significant influence on Work Readiness.

Based on the H2 and H3 arguments, we propose the full mediation hypothesis. The logic is as follows: Experiential Learning does enhance Work Readiness [H1], but this occurs primarily because Experiential Learning functions as an incubator for Digital Skill [H2], and it is this Digital Skill that ultimately becomes a crucial component evaluated as Work Readiness by employers [H3]. In other words, Digital Skill is the intervening mechanism that transforms "experience" into "readiness". This mediating role is consistent with recent empirical findings (Adegbite, 2024; Mabungela & Mtiki, 2024), which confirm Digital Skill/Literacy as an essential bridge in the work readiness model. Therefore:

H4: Digital Skill significantly mediates the relationship between Experiential Learning and Work Readiness.

The $[X \rightarrow M \rightarrow Y]$ mediation path, as outlined in H1-H4, answers the question of "how" the process occurs. However, this model remains incomplete as it fails to answer the question of "when" (i.e., its boundary conditions). The effectiveness of Experiential Learning is not universal; its positive impact on Work Readiness likely depends on the individual characteristics of the student (Fromm et al., 2021). This awareness of boundary conditions was also acknowledged by (Adegbite, 2024), who attempted to test Life-Career Knowledge as a moderator. Prior work tested life-career knowledge as a potential moderator, but the effect was not supported. This non-significant finding leaves a an unresolved conceptual gap: the model remains incomplete because its true boundary conditions remain unidentified.

Prior research reported a non-significant moderation effect can be explained by our theoretical argument: Life-Career Knowledge is likely more appropriately conceptualized as an outcome (a result of learning) rather than as a condition (a moderator). Therefore, this study proposes a moderator that is theoretically and correctly positioned: Self-Efficacy.

Rooted in Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), Self-Efficacy is defined as an individual's belief in their own capability to succeed in specific situations or tasks. In this context, Self-Efficacy is not a learned skill (like Digital Skill) but rather a psychological filter that students possess before and during their Experiential Learning. Bandura (1986) argued that self-efficacy is a primary determinant of whether

an individual will initiate action, how much effort they will expend, and how long they will persist in the face of difficulties.

The logic for the moderation of Self-Efficacy on the $X \rightarrow Y$ relationship is as follows: (a) Students with HIGH Self-Efficacy participating in Experiential Learning will tend to be more proactive, persistent, embrace challenging tasks, and view failure as a learning opportunity. For them, the impact of the experience will be maximized, potentially leading to higher Work Readiness. (b) Conversely, students with LOW Self-Efficacy in the same program may remain passive, avoid challenges, and give up easily. For them, the experience fails to deliver optimal impact, potentially weakening the $X \rightarrow Y$ relationship..

The $X \rightarrow Y$ relationship is, therefore, conditional upon the level of Self-Efficacy. Based on this strong theoretical argument addresses an unresolved conceptual gap identified in prior research we formulate the final hypothesis:

H5: Self-Efficacy significantly moderates (strengthens) the positive relationship between Experiential Learning and Work Readiness.

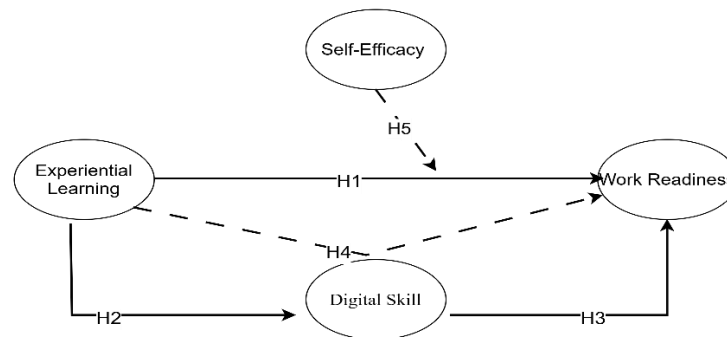


Figure 1. Theoretical Model Figure

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative approach utilizing an explanatory correlational design. The primary objective is to explain and test the causal relationships hypothesized within the moderated mediation model (Hair et al., 2022). In line with this objective, data were collected using a cross-sectional survey method, wherein all data for the independent (Experiential Learning), dependent (Work Readiness), mediating (Digital Skill), and moderating (Self-Efficacy) variables were gathered from respondents at a single point in time (Sarstedt et al., 2021). This approach was selected for its efficiency in testing theoretical models and its alignment with standard methodologies used in this research domain.

Population and Sampling Technique

The target population for this study comprised active undergraduate students from various universities in Indonesia who possessed practical work experience. The research sample was drawn using a purposive sampling technique (Hair et al., 2022). Strict inclusion criteria were established to ensure respondent relevance: (1) Students who had completed an Experiential Learning program [such as an Internship, Field Work Practice, or similar program] within the last 12 months, and (2) Voluntary willingness to participate in the survey. Data collection was conducted online via a questionnaire distributed through social media platforms and academic networks to reach a broad and diverse audience. This

population was considered appropriate, as students who have recently completed an experiential learning program are in a transitional phase between education and employment, making them particularly relevant for assessing perceptions of work readiness and competency development.

Sample Size

The determination of the sample size was based on an a priori statistical power analysis using G*Power 3.1 (Faul & Lang, 2009), ensuring methodological rigor. This step was crucial as the research model includes a moderation test (H5), an effect that is theoretically often "small" and requires substantial statistical power for accurate detection (Hair et al., 2022). By setting stringent parameters ($\alpha = 0.05$, power $1-\beta = 0.95$) to detect a small-to-medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.05$), G*Power indicated that the minimum required sample size was $n = 372$.

The initial data collection process gathered approximately 500+ responses. After a meticulous data cleaning process (which included removing incomplete data, straight-lining, and extreme outliers), a final, clean sample suitable for analysis was obtained, totaling $n = 469$. This final sample size ($n=469$) substantially exceeds the minimal threshold required by G*Power ($n=372$). This confirms that the study possesses very strong and superior statistical power (well above the threshold), providing high confidence in the hypothesis testing results, particularly for H5 (moderation).

Variable Measurement (Operationalization)

All variables in this study were measured using classic and seminal instruments that have been extensively validated, ensuring the highest level of validity and reliability. Respondents were asked to provide their responses on a 7-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 7=Strongly Agree).

(1) Experiential Learning was measured using 4 items adapted from the foundational scale of (Kolb, 1984), focusing on the learning cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, active experimentation, and abstract conceptualization.

(2) Work Readiness, the dependent variable, was measured using 3 items from the seminal scale by (Fugate et al., 2004). This scale was chosen as it represents the "gold standard" definition of the employability construct, focusing on psycho-social attributes (e.g., adaptability, social capital, etc.).

(3) Digital Skill was measured using 3 items from the established scale by (Gui, 2011). This scale was intentionally chosen for its focus on foundational digital skills. (4) Self-Efficacy was measured using 4 items adapted directly from the scale construction guide pioneered by (Bandura, 1986). This scale was selected as it measures individual belief directly from its primary theoretical source, providing the strongest possible content validity.

We intentionally selected this combination of classic and seminal scales (Bandura, 1986; Fugate et al., 2004; Gui, 2011; Kolb, 1984) to ensure the highest measurement validity. This ensures that the hypothesis testing results (particularly for H5) are built upon a robust and defensible foundation.

Data Analysis Technique

To test the five hypotheses proposed in this moderated mediation model, the study utilized Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The analysis was conducted using the SmartPLS

4 software (Hair et al., 2022). The PLS-SEM approach was chosen for two primary reasons: (1) It aligns with the research objective, which is focused on prediction and variance explanation, and (2) Its robust capability in handling complex models (such as moderation and mediation) without the strict assumptions of normal data distribution (Hair et al., 2022). This technical choice is also consistent with methodologies commonly used in similar studies.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Respondent Characteristics

This study successfully collected a total of N = 469 clean and complete questionnaires from students at two universities in the Jabodetabek region. This sample exceeds the minimum threshold (n=372) required by the G*Power analysis. Respondent characteristics show a relatively balanced distribution, comprising 54% male and 46% female. The majority of respondents (over 99%) were within the productive age range of 21-24 years, which is the primary age group for final-year students who have completed an Experiential Learning (internship) program, thereby ensuring sample homogeneity and relevance.

Measurement Model Evaluation

The PLS-SEM analysis begins with the evaluation of the measurement model (outer model) to ensure instrument validity and reliability. Convergent Validity was evaluated via Outer Loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The majority of indicator outer loadings were above the ideal value of 0.70. While several indicators (DS1, DS2, DS5, EL4, WR2) had loadings between 0.60 and 0.70 (see Table 1), Hair et al (2022) state that these loadings are still acceptable as long as the AVE value of the respective construct is above 0.50.

Table 1 Constructs' reliability and validity

Construct	Item	Outer Loading	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted
Digital Skill	DS1	0.812	0.878	0.885	0.623
	DS2	0.804			
	DS3	0.704			
	DS4	0.848			
	DS5	0.806			
	DS6	0.752			
Experiential Learning	EL1	0.729	0.882	0.882	0.547
	EL2	0.719			
	EL3	0.744			
	EL4	0.736			
	EL5	0.758			
	EL6	0.746			
	EL7	0.764			
	EL8	0.719			
Self-efficacy	SE1	0.779	0.851	0.877	0.521
	SE2	0.817			

	SE3	0.791			
	SE4	0.736			
	SE5	0.639			
	SE6	0.652			
	SE7	0.611			
Work Readiness	WR1	0.738	0.826	0.832	0.537
	WR2	0.774			
	WR3	0.671			
	WR4	0.716			
	WR5	0.804			
	WR6	0.683			

The results in Table 1 confirm the model's robustness. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for all constructs were above the 0.50 threshold (Digital Skill=0.632; Experiential Learning=0.547; Self-Efficacy=0.521; Work Readiness=0.537). Furthermore, internal consistency reliability was also very strong, with all Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values well above the 0.70 threshold. Thus, the model's convergent validity and reliability have been convincingly met.

Structural model assessment

Finally, Discriminant Validity was tested using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) criterion, which is the modern and more stringent standard (Henseler et al., 2015). The results in Table 2 show that all HTMT values between constructs were well below the 0.85 threshold. The highest value was only 0.82 (between DS and WR). This proves that the four constructs in this study (EL, DS, SE, WR) are distinct entities that do not overlap.

Table 2 Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio HTMT

	DS	EL	SE	WR	SE x EL
DS					
EL	0.701				
SE	0.619	0.726			
WR	0.828	0.817	0.666		
SE x EL	0.329	0.363	0.441	0.346	

Furthermore, discriminant validity was also assessed using the classic Fornell & Larcker criterion, as presented in Table 3. This criterion stipulates that the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct (the diagonal value) must be greater than its correlation coefficients with all other constructs. The results Table 3 demonstrate that all values on the diagonal Digital Skill (0.789), Experiential Learning (0.740), Self-efficacy (0.722), and Work Readiness (0.732) were consistently higher than the off-diagonal correlation values in their respective columns and rows (e.g., the highest being 0.713, 0.700, and 0.651). Thus, discriminant validity for all constructs in this study was successfully established.

Table 3 Fornell-larcker criterion

DS	EL	SE	WR
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DS	0.789			
EL	0.622	0.740		
SE	0.563	0.651	0.722	
WR	0.713	0.700	0.594	0.732

Inner Model Evaluation - R² and Model Fit

Once the measurement model (outer model) was declared valid and reliable, the next step was to evaluate the structural model (inner model). First, we assessed the model's predictive power via the R-Square (R²) value. The results show an R² for Digital Skill of 0.324 and for Work Readiness of 0.366. This means our model (EL, DS, SE) can explain 36.6% of the variance in Work Readiness, which is considered a moderate and substantial predictive power. Next, the Model Fit was evaluated using the SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual). This model achieved an SRMR = 0.057. As this value is below the 0.08 threshold, the research model is declared FIT and robust (Henseler et al., 2015).

Hypothesis Test Results (Direct Paths)

The subsequent evaluation involved hypothesis testing via bootstrapping (5,000 subsamples) to determine the significance of each path. The complete results for the path coefficients are presented in Table 4.

Table 4 Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Results

	Original sample	Sample mean	Standard deviation	T statistics	P values	F-square	Decision
H1: EL -> WR	0.356	0.354	0.045	7.859	0.000	0.162	Accepted
H2: EL -> DS	0.622	0.624	0.040	15.487	0.000	0.632	Accepted
H3: DS -> WR	0.420	0.421	0.040	10.445	0.000	0.266	Accepted
H4: EL -> DS -> WR	0.261	0.263	0.030	8.739	0.000		Accepted
H5: SE x EL -> WR	-0.006	-0.004	0.024	0.239	0.811	0.000	Rejected

H1 tested the influence of Experiential Learning on Work Readiness. The results indicated a positive and significant relationship (Beta = 0.356; T = 7.859; p = 0.000). The path exhibited a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.162$). Thus, H1 was ACCEPTED.

H2 tested the influence of Experiential Learning on Digital Skill. The results indicated a positive and highly significant relationship (Beta = 0.622; T = 15.487; p = 0.000). This path showed a large effect size ($f^2 = 0.632$). Thus, H2 was ACCEPTED.

H3 tested the influence of Digital Skill on Work Readiness. The results indicated a positive and significant relationship (Beta = 0.420; T = 10.445; p = 0.000), with a medium-to-large effect size ($f^2 = 0.266$). Thus, H3 was ACCEPTED.

H4 proposed that Digital Skill mediates the relationship between Experiential Learning and Work Readiness. Using the results from Table 5 (Specific Indirect Effects), the analysis showed that the mediation path (X → M → Y) was positive and highly significant (Beta = 0.261; T = 8.739; p = 0.000). As the direct path (H1) was also found to be significant (as reported above), this finding confirms the presence of complementary partial mediation. Thus, H4 was ACCEPTED.

H5 was the study's primary contribution hypothesis, testing whether Self-Efficacy moderates the X-Y relationship. The bootstrapping results for the interaction path (SE x EL → WR) in Table 4 showed a highly non-significant coefficient (Beta = -0.006; T = 0.239; p = 0.811). This extremely high p-value, combined with a zero effect size ($f^2 = 0.000$), conclusively demonstrates that H5 was not statistically supported. Thus, H5 was REJECTED.

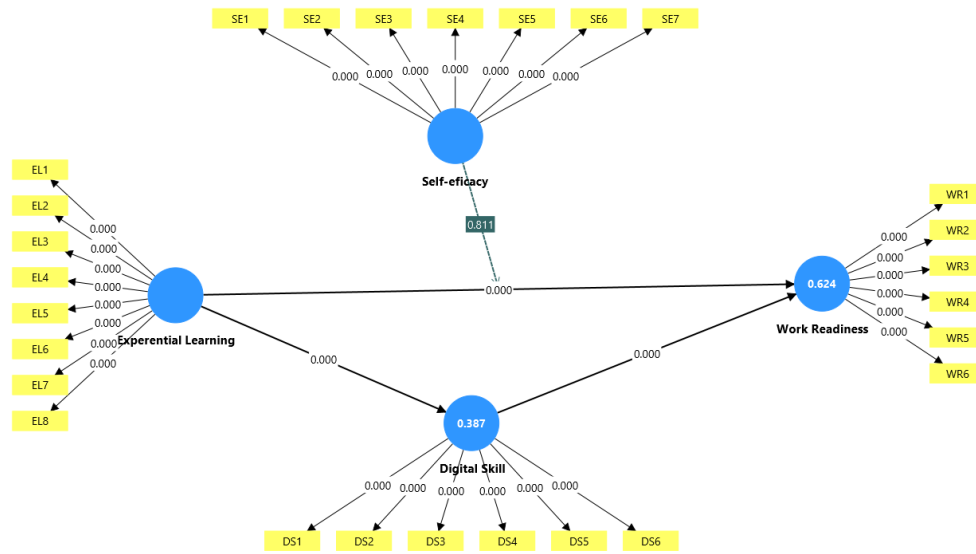


Figure 2. Path Coefficient

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study align with patterns reported in prior research, establishing that experiential learning is a significant predictor of student work readiness and consistently operates through the enhancement of digital skill as a key mediator. In this research, experiential learning was found to improve work readiness directly, while simultaneously enhancing digital skills, which in turn contributed significantly to work readiness (Kolb, 1984; Shore & Dinning, 2023).

The critical contribution of this study emerges from the moderation analysis. Similar to patterns observed in earlier studies, the moderation effect was not supported, this time using the construct of self-efficacy a fundamental psychological construct in Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986). This lack of significance indicates that the strength of experiential learning's influence on work readiness is not dependent on variations in student self-efficacy. In other words, even students with low self-efficacy still gain substantive benefits from engaging in experiential learning. The results indicate that variations in self-efficacy do not significantly alter the influence of experiential learning on work readiness in this study. This finding resonates with the reflective analysis by Sekhar, (2024), which suggests that transforming traditional pedagogy into more participatory and experiential models can effectively mitigate personal psychological barriers, such as lack of confidence and shyness, thereby providing universal benefits to student professional development.

In a competency model, tangible experience produces changes in technical skills, not in internal mental states (Ng, 2023; Van Laar et al., 2020). Digital skill, as a functional competency, is proven to play a central role because it is the type of skill directly applied when students confront modern digital work

contexts (Chonsalasin & Khampirat, 2022). This explains why the mediation effect of digital skill was robust and stable across two different studies, whereas the psychological moderators failed to function.

An alternative explanation that can be proposed is that experiential learning is inherently a highly structured learning environment. In such contexts, the experiences provided to students typically have clear instructions, mentor support, learning objectives, and standardized practical sequences. This type of environment diminishes the role of internal psychological variables like self-efficacy, as learning success becomes more determined by the quality of the experiential design rather than the individual's mental state (Sakitri et al., 2024). In other words, experiential learning "levels the playing field," allowing students with low self-efficacy to avoid significant hindrances because the learning structure itself helps them navigate initial uncertainty and anxiety.

This consistency in moderation failure also sends a methodological message: research designs seeking individual difference moderators on this pathway may be using a flawed theoretical assumption. Multiple studies in this domain have reported similar non-significant moderation results, suggesting that future research on psychological moderators should be grounded in stronger theoretical justification. Future research would be more relevant if directed toward context-based moderators, such as the intensity of the internship, the quality of industry supervision, or curriculum structure (Lan Lu, 2022; Malhotra et al., 2023) as these factors are theoretically closer to the operational character of experiential learning itself.

Thus, this study provides a sharper contribution than previous research. Beyond confirming the importance of digital skill as a primary mediator, this study also strengthens the evidence that the pathway from experiential learning to work readiness is robust, universal, and non-contingent on psychological conditions. This finding corrects the underlying assumption that educational interventions are effective only for students with specific psychological profiles. On the contrary, the results indicate that experiential learning is an inclusive pedagogical model that works in a relatively equitable manner for all students, regardless of their level of self-efficacy.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study provide several significant theoretical implications for the development of research on experiential learning, digital skill, and work readiness. First, this study confirms that the foundational mechanism of experiential learning operates primarily through a competency-based mechanism, rather than an individual psychological one. Consistent results across recent studies and the present research demonstrate that experiential learning generates changes in behavior and work readiness primarily because students acquire direct experience that enhances functional skills, particularly digital skills. This reinforces the literature that positions experiential learning as a means of competency transformation, as affirmed by Kolb (1984) and expanded by (Kolb and Kolb, 2018) .

Second, this study provides a conceptual correction to the assumption that the Experiential Learning → Work Readiness path is conditional. The non-significant moderation effect observed in this study, which utilized self-efficacy as a theoretically strong moderator, indicates that psychological variables do not play a role in strengthening or weakening the influence of EL on work readiness. This consistency provides a foundation for developing new theoretical models that treat this path as a stable and universal non-conditional pathway. Consequently, this research challenges prior approaches that sought to position psychological variables as moderators, affirming that such approaches may have a weak conceptual basis.

Third, this study enriches the understanding of digital skill as the primary mediation mechanism in the experiential learning - work readiness relationship. Digital skill is proven to be the nucleus of the competency-based transformation emerging from direct learning experiences. This finding aligns with

digital competency frameworks proposed by (Matriano, 2023; Yusof, 2022) which position digital skills as a foundational capability for work in the technology-based economy. This research thus solidifies the position of digital skill as a stable and essential mediator, while offering a clear theoretical basis for future research to develop more comprehensive competency models.

Fourth, this study contributes to the discussion on the theoretical boundaries of Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) when applied to experience-based learning contexts. The failure of self-efficacy as a moderator suggests that self-belief does not always function as an amplifying factor in learning contexts that are structured, guided, and situational. This opens a new discourse for researchers to review the relevance and operational limits of the self-efficacy construct within the context of practical learning and the initial entry into the workforce.

Finally, this study offers a new direction for work readiness theory: shifting the focus from individual psychological factors to learning environment factors and the quality of the experience. By demonstrating that experiential learning works consistently without being influenced by student psychological conditions, this study provides a basis for formulating theoretical models that position instructional design, intensity of experience, and real-world exposure as key variables in building work readiness. This implication has the potential to strengthen educational theories that emphasize the function of the environment and tangible experience in shaping the work competencies of the younger generation.

Practical and Managerial Implications

The research findings offer several practical implications for higher education institutions, curriculum developers, and industry stakeholders. First, the results confirm that experiential learning is one of the most effective and inclusive pedagogical strategies for preparing students for the workplace. Because its influence is not contingent on psychological factors like self-efficacy, universities can implement experiential learning broadly without needing to segment or select students based on individual characteristics. This simplifies the institution's ability to design programs that can be equitably accessed by all students.

Second, the role of digital skill as the primary mediator signifies that digital skills must be a core component of every experiential learning program. Educational institutions must ensure that the learning experiences provided are not just practical, but also integrate the use of digital technologies relevant to workforce demands. Strengthening technological infrastructure, providing training on industry-standard software, and collaborating with digital-first companies are strategic steps that can enhance the program's effectiveness.

For example, universities can operationalize experiential learning by embedding mandatory digital task components within internship and work-integrated learning programs, such as requiring students to use project management platforms, data analysis tools, or collaborative digital systems commonly adopted in industry. Assessment should be based not only on participation but also on demonstrable outputs, such as digital reports, dashboards, or project deliverables that reflect real workplace practices.

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Third, the failure of psychological variables to moderate the experiential learning - work readiness relationship sends an important message to educational institutions: the focus for improving work readiness should be directed at providing high-quality direct experiences, not at individualized psychological reinforcement programs. In other words, the largest investment should be allocated to curriculum design, the quality of practical supervision, and industry partnerships. This approach is more realistic and operational than attempting to intervene in psychological aspects that have proven to be non-influential on this pathway.

Fourth, these findings provide a practical basis for companies or industry partners in designing internship programs. Programs that provide guided, real-world tasks will be more effective in enhancing student work readiness. Companies can strengthen the role of field supervisors and ensure that students are given opportunities to work on digital projects that reflect actual work conditions.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that must be considered when interpreting the results and formulating the next research agenda. First, the study's cross-sectional design means causal relationships cannot be fully ascertained. Although the findings are consistent with existing literature and theoretical models, longitudinal or experimental research is still necessary to validate the causal direction between experiential learning, digital skill, and work readiness.

Second, although the moderation effect of self-efficacy was not supported, this study only examined one psychological construct. While this result is consistent with patterns reported in recent literature, it remains possible that other factors such as social support, learning styles, or career orientation may play a moderating role in more specific contexts. However, because two consecutive studies in this research domain have reported non-significant moderation effects, future investigations should ground the selection of psychological moderators in much stronger theoretical justification.

Third, this study utilized a student sample from a single institution, so the generalization of results must be done cautiously. Variations in academic culture, curriculum quality, and institutional context across universities could potentially influence the effectiveness of experiential learning. Future research could expand the sample scope to multiple universities or different national contexts to test the consistency of the findings.

Fourth, the measurement of variables using self-report instruments may introduce perceptual or social desirability bias. The use of objective instruments, supervisor assessments, or real-task performance could provide a more comprehensive picture of the actual returns from experiential learning and digital skills.

Finally, although this study confirmed the stability of the digital skill mediation path, variations in the design of the experiential learning programs were not measured directly. The depth of experience, duration, task intensity, and quality of field supervision may play important roles not captured in this study. Therefore, future research should integrate these variables as potential learning-environment-based moderators

Future Research Agenda

Future research is advised to employ longitudinal or experimental designs to more robustly validate the causal directionality between experiential learning, digital skill, and work readiness. Furthermore, variations in the experiential learning program design such as practice intensity, supervision quality, and task depth should be investigated as more relevant potential moderators than psychological variables. Subsequent research could also broaden the sample context to multiple universities to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Finally, the use of objective data or real-world performance assessments is recommended to complement self-report data and reduce potential perceptual bias.

CONCLUSION

This study reaffirms the critical role of experiential learning in enhancing student work readiness. Empirical results indicate that experiential learning has a direct influence on work readiness, while simultaneously enhancing digital skills, which in turn function as a strong mediator in this relationship. This pattern is consistent with literature asserting that real-world learning experiences are capable of building the functional competencies required in the modern workplace.

The other key finding is the non-significance of the self-efficacy moderation effect. This pattern is consistent with previous observations in the literature, provides a strong indication that the relationship between experiential learning and work readiness is stable and not contingent on student psychological conditions. Thus, the assumption that the effect of experiential learning is strengthened by individual psychological factors did not receive empirical support. This shifts the theoretical understanding towards a model that emphasizes a competency-based mechanism over a psychological one.

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