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The Influence of Internship Experience Competency Certification and Soft Skills on the Job Readiness of Vocational High School Students Moderated by Work Interest

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ABSTRACT

Vocational High Schools (*Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan* or SMK) possess a crucial role in preparing students to get involved in the workforce. Students are ready to work if they have relevant work experience, master competency, and own strong soft skills. This readiness can be achieved when students actively participate in Internship Programs (*Praktik Kerja Lapangan* or PKL), hold competency certificates as proof of skill mastery, exhibit strong soft skills, and show a genuine interest in working. This study aims to examine the influence of internship experience, competency certification, and soft skills on students' work readiness, with job interest acting as a moderating variable. A quantitative approach was employed by distributing questionnaires to 12th-grade students majoring in Accounting and Financial Institutions at private vocational schools in Tangerang City. The study involved 359 respondents from 25 schools, selected using a non-probability sampling technique. Data were analyzed using SmartPLS 4.0 software. The results indicate that internship experience, competency certification, and soft skills have a positive and significant effect on students' work readiness. Furthermore, job interest is proven to moderate the relationship between these variables and work readiness.

Keywords: Internship Experience, Competency Certification, Soft Skills, Job Interest, Work Readiness

INTRODUCTION

Vocational High Schools (SMK) are formal educational institutions designed to prepare students to become skilled, well-characterized workers who are ready to enter the workforce according to their respective areas of expertise. SMKs play an important role in equipping students with the skills, knowledge, and professional attitudes needed by industry, enabling them to contribute to national economic development. To achieve these goals, a curriculum is required that accommodates students' work experience through internship programs (PKL), mastery of competencies through competency certification, as well as the development of soft skills that shape students' work readiness.

The internship program (PKL) is one of the key components of the SMK curriculum and is designed to provide students with real-world work experience in companies aligned with their fields of expertise. PKL activities give students the opportunity to understand workplace environments, industry standards, real challenges in the industrial world, apply the knowledge they have learned, and develop the technical skills needed to perform specific tasks. Therefore, adequate and effective PKL experience can enhance students' work readiness, as they have already adapted to actual work situations. However, a common issue that arises during PKL implementation is that not all students are able to carry out internships in companies that match their skill areas. Students often end up doing tasks unrelated to their majors or competencies, resulting in practical experience that does not align with their field of expertise.

In addition to PKL, competency certification also serves as an important indicator in assessing students' work readiness. Certification provides formal recognition that a student has mastered certain competencies within their field, acknowledged by industry. It can increase students' confidence and provide added value when seeking employment, as companies tend to prefer applicants whose competencies are proven through certification.

However, technical skills are not sufficient. Soft skills—such as communication, teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving—are crucial in today's work environment. Soft skills often become one of the determining factors for companies in hiring. Good mastery of soft skills enables students to adapt to the social environment in the workplace and build professional relationships. Without strong soft skills, SMK graduates may face difficulties working in teams or communicating effectively with colleagues, supervisors, or other stakeholders.

Work interest, as an internal individual factor, also plays a significant role in moderating the influence of various components of work readiness. Students with high work interest tend to be more motivated to develop their skills and achieve success in the workforce. Thus, work interest can influence the extent to which internship experience, competency certification, and soft skills contribute to work readiness.

Based on data published by the Central Bureau of Statistics (bps.go.id, 2024), the opened unemployment rate in Indonesia by level of education is as follows:

Table 1. Opened Unemployment Rate by Education Level

Education Level	Opened Unemployment Rate by Education Level			
	2021	2022	2023	2024
No schooling/Not yet complete & Complete Primary School	3,61	3,59	2,56	2,32
Junior High School	6,45	5,95	4,78	4,11
Senior High School (General)	9,09	8,57	8,15	7,05
Vocational High School	11,13	9,42	9,31	9,01
Certification/Associate Degree/Advanced Diploma	5,87	4,59	4,79	4,83
University	5,98	4,80	5,18	5,25

Source : https://www.bps.go.id/id

Based on the table above, the highest unemployment rate in 2024 is among graduates of Vocational High Schools (SMK), with a percentage of 9.01%. This indicates that many SMK graduates are unemployed and have not yet obtained jobs. The high number of unemployed SMK graduates may be caused by insufficient mastery of competencies and skills, which makes them less competitive in the job market.

As an educational institution designed to prepare students for the workforce, SMKs should make breakthroughs to reduce the unemployment rate among their graduates. Schools can enhance students' competency mastery through high-quality practical learning activities, internship programs, competency certification, and character development so students are fully prepared to enter the world of work.

Conceptual Framework

The work readiness of Vocational High School (SMK) students is influenced by several factors, including knowledge, skills, experience, attitudes, and individual interests. Mastery of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and student character (soft skills) can be developed through the learning process at school in accordance with the competency standards of each major. Mastery of competencies gained during the learning process can be demonstrated through the possession of competency certificates. Students who master competencies relevant to their respective fields are more likely to have the necessary abilities and skills to perform work according to their expertise.

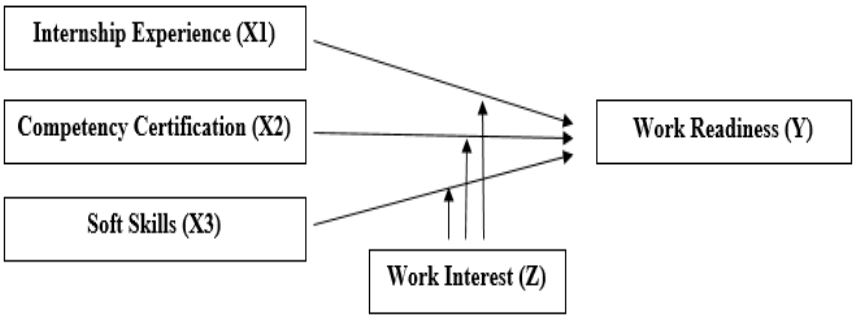
Students' work experience can be acquired through internship programs implemented by schools in collaboration with industry partners. During internships, students can apply their knowledge and competencies while learning about professionalism in the workplace. Students who have participated in industrial internships gain practical experience that serves as valuable capital when entering the workforce, in addition to their competencies and attitudes. This indicates that such students have better work readiness.

Soft skills refer to the ability of individuals to interact, communicate, and collaborate with others both in school and in the workplace. Soft skills include interpersonal abilities and personal attributes that enable students to adapt, build positive relationships, and respond to challenges and demands in the world of work. Attitudes and character can be developed through character education implemented during the learning process at school, as well as through the consistent application of school culture that supports the development of work readiness. Students who possess strong competencies, work experience, and good character will be more prepared to enter the workforce.

Work interest is one of the factors that can influence an individual's actions, including their willingness to work. Interest serves as a strong motivation for individuals to engage in activities related to employment. Without the desire or interest to work, it becomes difficult to encourage individuals to perform work-related tasks. Work interest can moderate the influence of internship experience, competency certification, and soft skills on work readiness.

Related to the explanation above, the conceptual framework of this research can be illustrated in the following conceptual diagram:

Figure 1. Research Framework



Hypotheses

Accroding to the explanations described above, this study aims to examine the influence of internship experience (Praktik Kerja Lapangan), competency certification, and soft skills on the work readiness of vocational high school (SMK) students, as well as how work interest moderates these relationships. Work interest is expected to moderate the effects of internship experience, competency certification, and soft skills on work readiness. The hypotheses formulated in this study are as follows:

H1: Internship Experience has an effect on Work Readiness
H2: Competency Certification has an effect on Work Readiness
H3: Soft Skills have an effect on Work Readiness
H4: Work Interest moderates the effect of Internship Experience on Work Readiness
H5: Work Interest moderates the effect of Competency Certification on Work Readiness
H6: Work Interest moderates the effect of Soft Skills on Work Readiness

METHOD

This research is a quantitative study that focuses on phenomena with specific characteristics in human life, commonly referred to as variables. Quantitative research methods are based on the philosophy of positivism and are used to examine natural phenomena in which the researcher functions as the primary instrument. Data collection techniques involve comparing and combining data from various sources, time periods, or methods. The data analysis process can be inductive or deductive. The results of quantitative research aim to understand meaning and construct phenomena rather than generalize (Sugiyono, 2021:16).

The variables used in this study consist of internship experience, competency certification, and soft skills as independent variables, and work readiness of SMK students majoring in Accounting and Financial Institutions for the 2023–2024 academic year as the dependent variable, with work interest serving as the moderating variable.

Sample

In this study, the researcher selected a sample of private vocational school students majoring in Accounting and Financial Institutions for the 2023/2024 academic year, distributed across 109 private SMKs in the city of Tangerang. The researcher determined the sample size using the Slovin formula as follows:

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

$$n = \frac{1.783}{1 + (1.783 \times 0{,}05^2)}$$

$$n = 327$$

Description:

n = Number of samples
N = Total population

e = Margin of error or the maximum tolerable error, which is 10%

Based on the calculation of the minimum required sample size, the minimum number of respondents needed is 327. In this study, the total sample used is 359 respondents. The sampling method used in this research is Non-Probability Sampling, with purposive sampling as the technique for selecting participants, meaning that samples were selected based on specific criteria. The criteria for selecting respondents are Grade XII students of private vocational schools (SMK) majoring in Accounting and Financial Institutions in the city of Tangerang for the 2023/2024 academic year.

The criteria for determining the sample in this study are as follows:

1. Grade XII students majoring in Accounting and Financial Institutions at private SMKs in Tangerang City.
2. Students who have participated in industry internship programs.
3. Students who have taken the vocational competency examination.

Data Collection

The data collection technique used in this research is a questionnaire distributed to each respondent. The questionnaire consists of several questions related to internship experience, competency certification, soft skills, and work interest, which must be answered by each participant. The questionnaire was distributed using Google Forms via WhatsApp and through direct visits to schools.

Data Analysis Technique

Related to the established hypotheses, the analytical method used in this study is SEM-PLS (Structural Equation Modeling–Partial Least Squares). This method is used to examine the influence among independent variables, the dependent variable, and the moderating variable. The relationships between variables, both direct and indirect, are measured using SmartPLS software (Partial Least Squares). According to Ghozali & Kusumadewi (2023:8), SEM-PLS involves two testing models: the Measurement Model (Outer Model) and the Structural Model (Inner Model). The stages of data analysis in this study are as follows:

1. Validity Test
   Convergent validity testing is conducted to determine whether the indicators used in the study are capable of measuring the intended constructs. Convergent validity can be assessed through the loading factor value, which must be greater than 0.5 to be considered valid (Ghozali & Latan 2015,74). Discriminant validity testing is conducted to examine whether different constructs possess distinct indicators. This ensures that no constructs overlap and that each construct can be clearly differentiated. According to Ghozali (2021:68), discriminant validity of reflective indicators can be assessed through cross-loading values, which must be higher than 0.7, and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), which must be higher than 0.5.
2. Reliability Test
   The reliability test is used to measure the consistency of data generated by the instruments used in the study. According to Gumanti (Gumanti et al., 2018), reliability testing refers to repeated measurements using the same instrument that consistently produce similar results. Reliability is assessed using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability through SmartPLS software. A research instrument is considered reliable if both Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values exceed 0,7 (Ghozali 2021,70).
3. Hypothesis Testing
   Hypothesis testing is conducted to examine the influence between independent variables, the dependent variable, and the moderating variable. In this study, hypothesis testing analyzes the effect of internship experience, competency certification, and soft skills on

work readiness, moderated by work interest. The structural equation (inner model) used in this study is as follows:

$$\boldsymbol{\eta = B\eta + \Gamma\xi + \zeta}$$

Description:
η = Vector of endogenous variables
ξ = Vector of exogenous variables
B = Regression coefficients among endogenous variables
Γ = Regression coefficients between exogenous and endogenous variables
ζ = Residual vector (unexplained variance)

4. Coefficient of Determination Test (R-square)
   The coefficient of determination test aims to determine the extent to which an independent variable (X) influences the dependent variable (Y). The R-square value can be seen in the model summary table. An R-square value of zero indicates that the independent variables have very limited ability to explain the dependent variable. Conversely, if the R-square value approaches one, it means the independent variables provide all the necessary information to explain the dependent variable. According to Ghozali (2021:75), an R-square value of 0.67 indicates a strong model, 0.33 indicates a moderate model, and 0.19 indicates a weak model.
5. Significance Test (F-test)
   The F-test examines the multiple regression coefficients of all independent variables (X) that influence the dependent variable (Y), using a significance level of 0.05. According to Ghozali & Kusumadewi (2023,73), the criteria for drawing conclusions are:
   a. If Sig < 0.05, H_0 is rejected and H_a is accepted, indicating that all independent variables have a significant effect on the dependent variable.
   b. If Sig > 0.05, H_0 is accepted and H_a is rejected, indicating that all independent variables do not significantly affect the dependent variable.
6. Partial Test (t-test)
   The t-test is used to measure the regression coefficients of independent variables in predicting the dependent variable. The significance level used in this research is α = 5% (0.05). The results of the t-test determine whether the research hypotheses are accepted or rejected, with the following criteria (Ghozali & Latan 2015,145) :
   a. If t-count < 1.96 and Sig < 0.05, H_0 is rejected and H_a is accepted.
   b. If t-count > 1.96 and Sig > 0.05, H_0 is accepted and H_a is rejected.
7. P-Value Test
   The P-value test examines the significance level of the relationship between exogenous and endogenous latent variables or indicators in the model. According to Ghozali & Latan (2015,145), the criteria are:
   a. If p-value < 0.05, H_0 is rejected and H_a is accepted.
   b. If p-value > 0.05, H_0 is accepted and H_a is rejected.

Operational Definition of Variables

The variables used in this study consist of independent variables, a dependent variable, and a moderating variable. The independent variables include internship experience, competency certification, and soft skills. The dependent variable is work readiness, while the moderating variable is work interest. The operational definitions are as follows:

1. Internship Experience (X1)
   Internship experience refers to the learning process conducted in the workplace. Students apply the knowledge and skills that they have acquired to complete assigned tasks. The experience gained during the internship can influence students' work readiness.

2. Competency Certification (X2)
   Competency certification is a form of recognition of students' mastery of competencies, documented in a competency certificate. Mastery of job-related competencies can influence students' readiness to enter the workforce.
3. Soft Skills (X3)
   Soft skills refer to students' responses, attitudes, and behaviors when facing certain situations. Students' ability in managing their soft skills effectively can influence their work readiness.
4. Work Readiness (Y)
   Work readiness refers to the condition in which students are prepared to perform job-related tasks. Work readiness is influenced by internship experience, competency mastery (proven by certification), soft skills, and students' work interest.
5. Work Interest (Z)
   The moderating variable is work interest. Students' interest in work can influence their participation in internships, certification exams, and soft skills development. As a moderating variable, work interest may strengthen or weaken the effects of internship experience, competency certification, and soft skills on work readiness.

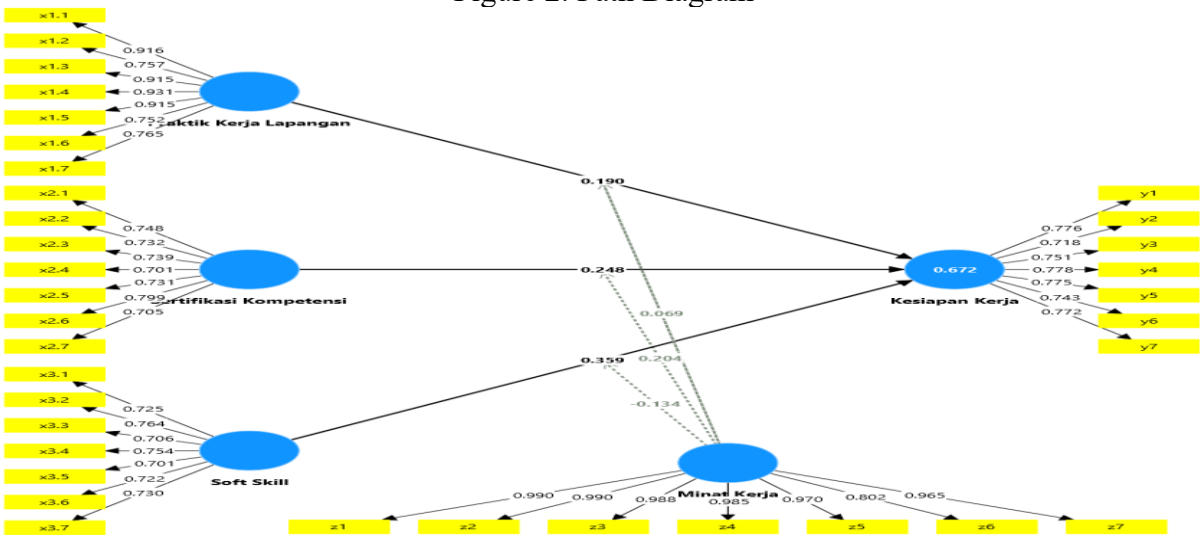
RESULTS

Validity Test

The validity test is conducted to measure whether each questionnaire item used to assess the indicators and variables is valid. Two types of validity tests that were conducted: refered to convergent validity and discriminant validity. The Outer Loading assessment is used to determine whether the indicators meet reliability requirements. Indicators are considered valid if the outer loading value is higher than 0.7.

The outer loading results are presented in Figure 2 (Path Diagram) below:

Figure 2. Path Diagram



Source: Output Smart PLS, (2025)

The Path Diagram above shows the outer loading values for each indicator of the variables studied, consisting of 35 indicators. The measurement model or outer model determines the relationship between the indicators and their respective variables by assessing the outer loading values. An indicator is considered valid if the outer loading value is equal to or

higher than ≥ 0.7 and the AVE value is higher than 0.5 (Hair et al., 2021). The results of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) are presented in the following table:

Table 2. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) Result

Variabel	AVE Value	Description
Intership Expericence	0.729	Valid
Competency Certification	0.544	Valid
Soft Skills	0.532	Valid
Work Interest	0.917	Valid
Job Readiness	0.577	Valid

Source: Output Smart PLS, (2025)

Based on Figure 2 (Path Diagram) and Table 2 (Average Variance Extracted Results), it presents that the outer loading values for each indicator are greater than 0.7, and the AVE values are higher than 0.5. Therefore, it can be concluded that all indicators representing the research variables are valid.

Reliability Test

The reliability test in this study was conducted to measure whether the instrument has consistency when used repeatedly. A construct can be considered reliable if its value is higher than 0.70. The results of the reliability test using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability are presented in the following table:

Table 3. Reliability Test Results

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability
Intership Expericence	0.936	0.936	0.949
Competency Certification	0.860	0.861	0.893
Soft Skills	0.853	0.854	0.888
Work Interest	0.984	0.988	0.987
Job Readiness	0.878	0.879	0.905

Source: Output Smart PLS, (2025)

Connected to the table above, it shows that the values of Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability for each construct are higher than 0.70, indicating that all constructs in the estimated model are reliable.

Coefficient of Determination Test (R Square)

The coefficient of determination reflects the extent to which the independent (exogenous) variables can explain the variation in the dependent (endogenous) variables within the structural model (inner model). The results of the coefficient of determination in this study are presented as follows:

Table 4. R Square Results

	R Square	R Square Adjusted
Job Readiness	0.672	0.665

Source: Output Smart PLS, (2025)

The table above, explains that the R Square value is 0.672. This indicates that 67.2% of the variability in job readiness can be explained by the variables soft skills, competency certification, and internship experience. The remaining 32.8% is explained by other variables outside the model.

Significance Test (F Square Test)

The F Square test assesses the contribution of the individual effect of one construct on the R^2 (coefficient of determination) of the construct it influences. The F Square results of this study are presented as follows:

Table 5. F Square Result

	f-square
Work Interest -> Job Readiness	0,073
Internship Experience -> Job Readiness	0,053
Competency Certification -> Job Readiness	0,133
Soft Skills -> Job Readiness	0,205
Work Interest x Competency Certification -> Job Readiness	0,115
Work Interest x Internship Experience -> Job Readiness	0,038
Work Interest x Soft Skills -> Job Readiness	0,091

Source: Output Smart PLS, (2025)

The table above, describes that internship experience has an F-square value of 0.053, indicating a small effect on job readiness. Competency certification has an F-square value of 0.133, indicating a moderate effect on job readiness. Meanwhile, soft skills have an F-square value of 0.205, indicating a moderate to strong effect on job readiness.

Hypothesis Testing

The hypothesis testing in this study was carried out using the SmartPLS 4.0 application by running the bootstrapping procedure according to the available steps in the software. The bootstrapping output in SmartPLS displays the t-statistic and p-value, which are used to determine whether the hypothesis should be accepted or rejected. The t-statistic values obtained from the analysis are compared with the t-table value.

In this research, the decision-making process for hypothesis acceptance is based on the two-tailed t-table values used to determine the standard significance level of 0.05. The study employs a 95% confidence level with a tolerance limit (α) of 0.05 or 5%, with a corresponding t-table value of 1.96. A hypothesis is accepted (H0 accepted and Ha rejected) if the t-statistic value is smaller than the t-table value (t-statistic < 1.96). Conversely, if the t-statistic value is higher than or equal to the t-table value (t-statistic ≥ 1.96), then H0 is rejected and Ha is accepted.

The results of the hypothesis testing using the bootstrapping procedure in the SmartPLS 4.0 application are as follows:

Table 6. Structural Model Hypothesis Testing

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
Work Interest -> Job Readiness	0,214	0,218	0,050	4,245	0,000
Internship Experience -> Job Readiness	0,190	0,188	0,048	3,948	0,000
Competency Certification -> Job Readiness	0,248	0,250	0,050	4,958	0,000
Soft Skills -> Job Readiness	0,359	0,362	0,053	6,827	0,000
Work Interest x Competency Certification -> Job Readiness	0,204	0,184	0,056	3,635	0,000
Work Interest x Internship Experience -> Job Readiness	0,069	0,068	0,033	2,064	0,039

Work Interest x Soft Skills -> Job Readiness	-0,134	-0,104	0,062	2,147	0,032

Source: Output Smart PLS, (2025)

Discussion

The table above, Presents that the results of the structural model hypothesis testing can be used to answer the research hypotheses formulated in the previous chapter. The interpretation of the structural model (Path Coefficient) hypothesis testing results in this study is explained as follows:

1. The Effect of Internship Experience on Job Readiness
   The P-value obtained is 0.000, which is smaller than the alpha value (α) of 0.05. The T-statistic value of 3.948 is higher than the t-table value of 1.96, with an original sample value of 0.190 (positive direction). It can be concluded that H01 is rejected and Ha1 is accepted, which means that internship experience has a positive and significant effect on job readiness. The higher the internship experience, the higher the job readiness of vocational high school students majoring in Accounting and Institutional Finance.
2. The Effect of Competency Certification on Job Readiness
   The P-value obtained is 0.000, which is smaller than the alpha value (α) of 0.05. The T-statistic value of 4.958 is higher than the t-table value of 1.96, with an original sample value of 0.248 (positive direction). Based on these results, the conclusion is that H02 is rejected and Ha2 is accepted, meaning that competency certification has a positive and significant effect on job readiness. The higher the competency certification, the greater the job readiness of vocational high school students majoring in Accounting and Institutional Finance.
3. The Effect of Soft Skills on Job Readiness
   The P-value obtained is 0.000, which is smaller than the alpha value (α) of 0.05. The T-statistic value of 6.827 is higher than the t-table value of 1.96, with an original sample value of 0.359 (positive direction). It can be concluded that H03 is rejected and Ha3 is accepted, which means that soft skills have a positive and significant effect on job readiness. The higher the soft skills, the greater the job readiness of vocational high school students majoring in Accounting and Institutional Finance.
4. The Effect of Internship Experience on Job Readiness Moderated by Work Interest
   The P-value obtained is 0.039, smaller than the alpha value (α) of 0.05. The T-statistic value of 2.064 is higher than the t-table value of 1.96, with an original sample value of 0.069 (positive direction). The result is that H04 is rejected and Ha4 is accepted, meaning that work interest moderates the effect of internship experience on job readiness. Work interest strengthens the influence of internship experience on the job readiness of vocational high school students majoring in Accounting and Institutional Finance.
5. The Effect of Competency Certification on Job Readiness Moderated by Work Interest
   The P-value obtained is 0.000, smaller than the alpha value (α) of 0.05. The T-statistic value of 3.635 is higher than the t-table value of 1.96, with an original sample value of 0.204 (positive direction). Based on these results, it can be concluded that H05 is rejected and Ha5 is accepted, which means that work interest moderates the effect of competency certification on job readiness. Work interest strengthens the influence of competency certification on the job readiness of vocational high school students majoring in Accounting and Institutional Finance.
6. The Effect of Soft Skills on Job Readiness Moderated by Work Interest
   The P-value obtained is 0.032, smaller than the alpha value (α) of 0.05. The T-statistic value of 2.147 is higher than the t-table value of 1.96, with an original sample value of –

0.134 (negative direction). The result shows that H06 is rejected and Ha6 is accepted, meaning that work interest moderates the effect of soft skills on job readiness. Work interest weakens the influence of soft skills on job readiness. The positive effect of soft skills becomes weaker for students with high work interest because students with strong soft skills may prefer to continue their studies at the university level rather than enter the workforce immediately. Meanwhile, students with lower soft skills tend to be more motivated and prepared to work.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted with 359 respondents from private vocational high schools majoring in Accounting and Institutional Finance in the Tangerang City area. The demographic results show that 25 schools participated in filling out the questionnaire, with the majority of respondents being female and having participated in internship programs. The study consists of six hypotheses, all of which are accepted. Based on the analysis and discussion, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. The first hypothesis test shows that internship experience has a positive and significant effect on job readiness. Internship activities help increase students' job readiness.
2. The second hypothesis test explains that competency certification has a positive and significant effect on job readiness. Students with competency certificates tend to have higher job readiness than those who are not certified.
3. The third hypothesis test presents that soft skills have a positive and significant effect on job readiness. Students with strong soft skills can adapt more easily, collaborate effectively, and complete tasks efficiently, making them more prepared for the workforce.
4. The fourth hypothesis test indicates that work interest moderates the effect of internship experience on job readiness. Work interest strengthens the influence of internship experience on job readiness.
5. The fifth hypothesis test shows that work interest moderates the effect of competency certification on job readiness. Work interest strengthens the influence of competency certification on job readiness.
6. The sixth hypothesis test indicates that work interest moderates the effect of soft skills on job readiness. Work interest weakens the effect of soft skills on job readiness. Students with strong soft skills but high interest in further education may be less inclined to enter the workforce immediately, whereas students with lower soft skills tend to be more motivated and ready to work.

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