Guidance as A Key Factor for Quality Outcomes in Experiential Learning and Its Influence on Undergraduate Management Students throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic

Anat Shteigman[1], Michal Levi-Bliech[1] & Arie Reshef[1]

[1] Western Galilee College, Israel

Correspondence: Anat Shteigman, School of Management, Western Galilee College, Hamichlala road, Acre, 2412101, Israel. E-mail: anatshteigman@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper presents a study that explores how "field experience" programs generate a meaningful bridge between the "theoretical" academic world and the "real" labor market. We examine this model in a population of undergraduate management students who participated in experiential learning programs via internship-integrating courses. The results unravel the significance of the experience-based educational program during Covid-19, formulating new correlations unique to this period. The study's contribution focuses on three main areas. First, the findings shed light on the academic supervisor's importance in establishing the quality of the program and consequently improving students' perception of its contribution to their integration in the employment market. Moreover, we found that the contribution of the guidance provided by the organizational mentor diminished during the Covid-19 period compared to that shown in former studies. Additionally, an innovative mediating effect of the guidance provided by the organizational mentor was found, one that generated an association between the quality of the program and its contribution to integration in the employment market. These results receive further validation during the period of the study, when academic institutions were required to show flexibility and adaptation, leading to the utilization of previously uncustomary distance learning methods.

Keywords: Field experience, academic supervisor, organizational mentor, integration in the employment market, Covid-19

1. Introduction

The teaching of management deals with the process of imparting knowledge, skills, and values to students at management schools in order to help them develop unique abilities relevant for their employment in post-graduation managerial positions. Managerial positions in the business and public sector are characterized by a great deal of complexity, resulting in a large array of challenges that multiple as the business world develops (Szarucki, 2013). In order to handle these challenges and train the next generation of managers, advanced and varied programs were developed as an inseparable part of training in schools of management.

There is much criticism of contemporary learning processes in academic institutions throughout the world and of insufficient preparation for the employment market. Oliver-Lumerman and Drori (2021) claim that in order to remain relevant in the changing world, academic institutions must open up, adapt themselves to surrounding society, and replace the traditional conception of academia as a research-oriented ivory tower. They must also change their orientation to include a contribution to the community in most of fields of operation. Other researchers criticize unsatisfactory and even bad job performance by graduates (Taylor et al., 2002). This criticism and others indicate the urgent need to create a link between theoretical studies on campus and the employment market that students join after graduating (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). Internships are a practical way for college students to envision a future career with limited investment of time and resources (Rothman and Sisman (2016). Experiential learning which focuses primarily on transformation of experience into knowledge can have a lasting impact on the abilities of the business school graduates to face the challenges of work in the organizations they join and thereby effectively contribute to organizational performance (Eckhaus et al. (2017).

Following this trend, many institutions have met the challenge and opened "field experience" (internship) programs aimed at generating a meaningful bridge between the "theoretical" academic world and the "real" labor market. The

challenge encompassed by practical work intensified in 2020 with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic radically changed the lives of students and their learning processes. Most learning activities were transferred to online media and encounters with supervisors took place by telephone or on the Zoom platform. In practice, students were prevented from continuing the internship activities planned for them. With no advance planning, the Covid-19 crisis created for students and supervisors an opportunity to experience remote work as in the rest of the economy. During the COVID-19 pandemic, practical activities for undergraduate students were severely disrupted. Management training requires students to gain sufficient practical experience that confirms theoretical knowledge by applying themselves to field work.

Virtual practical training may certainly become a significant part of the "new normal" world, where the prevalence of remote management will grow (Dalrymple & Dolan, 2020). Park and Jones (2021) claim that academics and employers must investigate and evaluate the quality of virtual training in order to ensure that students will take part in a high standard experiential internship. The purpose of the current study is to examine the attitude of students to the field experience course held during the Covid-19 crisis regarding two aspects: evaluating the quality and contribution of the "field experience" process in general and of the e-learning process in particular during the Covid-19 period.

2. Literature Review

In this chapter we will discuss the research variables with reference to previous studies conducted in the field. We will first discuss the principles of experiential learning in general, and then address the importance of experiential learning in management schools as part of manager training, its quality, and the characteristics that this program needs to preserve in order to be successful. This will lead to a discussion of the two facilitators who are a significant part of the program's success - the academic supervisor and the organizational mentor. Finally, we will review how this program contributes to students' integration into the employment market

2.1 The Principles of Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is a process that involves learning by doing. When students are engaged in hands-on experiences and reflection, they are more able to connect theories and knowledge learned in the classroom to actual situations. In the college classroom, l earning through experience is not a new concept. Leading educational psychologists such as Dewey (1997), Rogers (1969), and Kolb (1984) provided the foundations for learning theories that focus on "learning through experience" or "learning by doing". Kolb (1984) presumed that the experiential learning conception is a cyclic conception of reflection and formulating thought in the form of action, which occurs through concrete learning. The learner examines and connects his conclusions to the realistic conditions in the workplace (Hunter & Mayo, 1999).

2.2 Experiential Learning in the Training of Novice Managers

As early as 1979, Mintzberg (1979) objected to the theoretical training of managers. Mintzberg (1979) questioned whether it is possible to take young people who have never managed anything in their life and presume to prepare them in two years of studies for work in management. Mintzberg (1979) defined ten roles of managers in an organization. He claimed that management cannot be learned only at school as theoretical material. Rather, these theoretical studies must be supplemented by experiential learning. Eckhaus et al. (2017) joined this approach and presumed that management is a skill that can be learned by combining practical experiencing. Experiential learning was described as one of the most efficient management development instruments (Holman & Mumford, 2001), and particularly as a tool for teaching management. Practical learning opportunities allow students to delve deeper into the concepts that interest them and discover their strengths, weaknesses, and perspectives with regard to the management world. This process is carried out by adding a relevant context to ideas and skills discussed in class. According to Eckhaus et al. (2017), experiential learning opportunities can help students develop a deep grasp of work in the organization beyond learning the theoretical concepts, because of the special features of this type of learning.

2.3 The Professional Level of the Program

Recognizing the significance of experiential learning as an inseparable part of manager training, many researchers have tried to define the nature of the internship program and its structure as a key for its success for students and organizations (Divine et al., 2007; Jenkins, 2001; Rangan & Natarajarathinam, 2014; Stansbie et al., 2013). In order to generate a high standard experiential program that will meet the challenges and provide a maximal impact on student training, it is necessary to have a well-structured program that will meet the needs of all stakeholders (Bourner & Ellerker, 1998). Moghaddam (2014) expands on the contribution of the practical program beyond

management skills and claims that developing values is one of the important areas in imparting capabilities for becoming integrated in the world of managerial work. Moghaddam (2014) found that practical programs helped students acquire values that are important for the business world.

2.4 Structuring An Experiential Program

Experiential learning is more than simply organizing opportunities for students to gain experience in the world of work. We must view experience-based curricula through a learning theory lens to realize the full potential of learning by doing (Bowen, 2020).

Rangan and Natarajarathinam (2014) helped clarify the program's ideal structure and defined several features of successful internship. Rothman and Sisman (2016) divided field experience activities into two major categories: observational-participatory and second integrative learning processes. Accordingly, various researchers characterized three different internship tracks in the training of management students (King & Tang, 2020; Kolb, 1984; Park & Jones, 2021; Tuma & Sisson, 2019): First, ***the shadow model*** – This model focuses on learning a managerial role by watching a manager execute the ten roles defined by Mintzberg (1979). Second, ***the routine work model*** – The student joins a unit in the organization and experiences several routine tasks typical of that unit, in the assumption that the experiencing will make it possible to learn the practical course of action for that occupation. Third, ***the project execution model*** – When focusing on this type of experiencing, the student as an individual (or as part of a team of several students) experiences the full circle of executing a project in an organization, beginning with defining the need, through formulating goals and aims, gathering data, analyzing the data, and writing the conclusions and recommendations for the organization.

The quality of the program, which we discussed in the preceding paragraphs, is given a central place in the research model, and we will address it in the following paragraphs in Hypothesis 1, Hypothesis 2, and Hypothesis 5.

2.5 Quality of the Guidance

Many researchers have tried to define the essential characteristics that contribute to the success of the internship program (Beard & Morton, 1998; Hite & Bellizzi, 1986; Tovey, 2001). Beard and Morton (1998) contended that the quality of the guidance, together with the policy of the organization and the students' efforts, are the three factors that most influence the program's success. Namely, aside from the program being of high standards and meaningful for the students, the quality of the guidance in general is also important, as is the feedback given to the students by the supervisors in particular. Rangan and Natarajarathinam (2014) argued that a high standard and well built practical program will generate good quality guidance and a relationship between the organizational mentor and the academic supervisor and students.

Hite and Bellizzi (1986) claimed that one of the components that define a successful internship is combined guidance by two supervisors concurrently, the academic supervisor and the organizational mentor (Kolb, 1984). They found that the two supervisors should be present in all stages of the internship (Hite & Bellizzi, 1986; Kolb, 1984). The study attaches extra significance to the commitment of the supervisors, both from the academic institution and from the organization, as responsible for the program's success and its contribution to student training (Zopiatis & Constanti, 2012). Tovey (2001) defined the functions of the supervisor as providing students with professional accompaniment and guidance as well as mentoring throughout the process. Narayanan et al. (2010), Zopiatis and Constanti (2012), and Kolb (1984) claimed that meaningful feedback in the internship provides a basis for goal-directed processes and provides an indication while in motion and while learning from the student's success in the new field. Theories of experiential learning stress that the efficacy of organizations and individuals is affected directly by the quality of the feedback – unsatisfactory performance could often improve with better feedback and support (Kolb, 1984). Accordingly, in this study we shall examine the quality of the guidance provided both by the academic supervisor and the organizational mentor and its effect on the quality of the program.

Hypothesis 1: The guidance provided by the academic supervisor will be positively associated with the quality of the program.

The college studied in this research is located in the northern part of Israel. Due to the unique structure of the internship program at this college, where the academic supervisor has the autonomy to outline the structure of the program and the connection with the organization, we posited the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2: The guidance provided by the academic supervisor will be positively associated with the guidance provided by the organizational mentor.

Hypothesis 3: The quality of the program will be positively associated with the guidance provided by the organizational mentor.

2.6 The Contribution of Practical Studies to Integration in the Employment Market

Early studies on field experience showed positive changes in students' feelings regarding practical work. These changes relate to two main aspects: the first is personal and social efficacy (Beinstein, 1976) and the second is sense of responsibility and career development (Eyler, 1993; Hursh & Borzak, 1979; Williams, 1990). With regard to professional development, the students expected the internship to provide them with possibilities for forming business connections, better knowledge of the employment market (Groves et al., 1977), and more satisfaction with their future job (Bales, 1979). The effects on learning outcomes were described by students as a bridge between the theory taught in class and the practical world (Nevett, 1985).

Many studies indicate the fact that experiential learning has an important role in preparing students for their first steps in the employment market (Callanan & Benzing, 2004; D'Abate, 2010; *Salary survey*, 2019). Gault et al. (2000) found that graduates of a Bachelor's degree program in business administration who participated in an internship program in organizations displayed considerable advantages over their peers who had not participated in the program. It took the program participants less time to find a job, their pay was higher, and they reported greater satisfaction.

These results were further validated by studies conducted in Israel. A survey held by the Israeli National Students' Association in 2020 among students who participated in internship programs showed that most of the students attested that they had acquired professional capabilities and were highly satisfied with the results of their participation in the field experiencing programs (*Nuis -National Union of Iseaeli Students*, 2020). According to Regev and Gordon (2021), there are significant differences in income and extent of employment in favor of students who had completed the program versus students who had not participated in such a program. Accordingly, we seek to examine the factors that contribute to integration in the employment market.

Hypothesis 4: The guidance provided by the academic supervisor will be positively associated with students' integration in the employment market.

Hypothesis 5: The quality of the program will be positively associated with students' integration in the employment market.

Hypothesis 6: The guidance provided by the organizational mentor will be positively associated with students' integration in the employment market.

2.7 Impact of the Covid-19 Crisis on Students' Experiential Learning Processes

The Covid-19 pandemic, which erupted in 2020, changed human life around the world both directly and indirectly. One of the fields affected by the Covid-19 pandemic was higher education, which switched promptly and fully to remote learning. This affected experiential learning (*Glasdoor website*, (2020), as half of all internships (52%) of students in US organizations were cancelled from the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis. Many companies cancelled the option of student internships due to budget restrictions or inability to switch to an online format. Other companies switched to virtual internships or remote work (Stansell, 2020). The main advantage of online internships at this point in time is a safe and well-established practical learning experience based on carrying out an authentic task or project for the organization in which students are interning (Hora, 2020). Online internship can provide students with experience in managing online projects and communication with other team members, processes that are currently common in the life of many organizations (Hora, 2020). Park and Jones (2021) claimed that in order for the virtual internship to succeed there is need for appropriate technological preparation in organizations as well as to train contact people in remote guidance, together with preparation of the students and imparting technological skills and communication skills necessary for remote learning.

Bowen (2020) reported that the Covid-19 crisis, when universities were closed, impaired work integrated learning (WIL). One reason is the learning space in students' homes, which is unsuited for professional work. Bowen (2020) claimed that this is a noise- and distraction-inclined environment that lacks suitable technological equipment and designated study rooms. When studying on campus before the crisis, students could communicate with the organization in specially designated classrooms. Bowen (2020) claimed that in order to increase the efficacy of the learning process it is necessary to prepare students slated to participate in internships by remote work:

2.8 Practical Internship in A Management Program at An Academic College in Northern Israel

The research population consisted of undergraduate students who were participating in experiential learning via internship-integrating courses in the academic college's management school. The internship-integrating courses constitute a unique program for experiential learning by students who contend with "real" problems challenging organizations and companies in practice and enable participants to apply the knowledge accumulated during their studies in planning and executing projects. Management of the project in the organization in which students are placed is carried out in work groups of 4 students each. Group work is important and its purpose is to instill in students teamwork skills and values. The course at the college, which takes place concurrent with work in the organizations, is divided in two: The first part consists of full forum classes for all students, which impart study material while encouraging students to share experiences from their internship with each other. The second part is carried out in smaller study groups and consists of a follow-up and consulting process by the academic supervisor with each of the groups. Throughout the process the academic supervisor accompanies the students' work in the organization, closely coordinated with the organizational mentor, and helps reach decisions at major junctions. In order to maintain a high professional level of guidance that is relevant for the employment market, academic supervisors are selected by two main criteria: first, practical management experience in organizations; and second, a high academic level, as described in Figure 1.

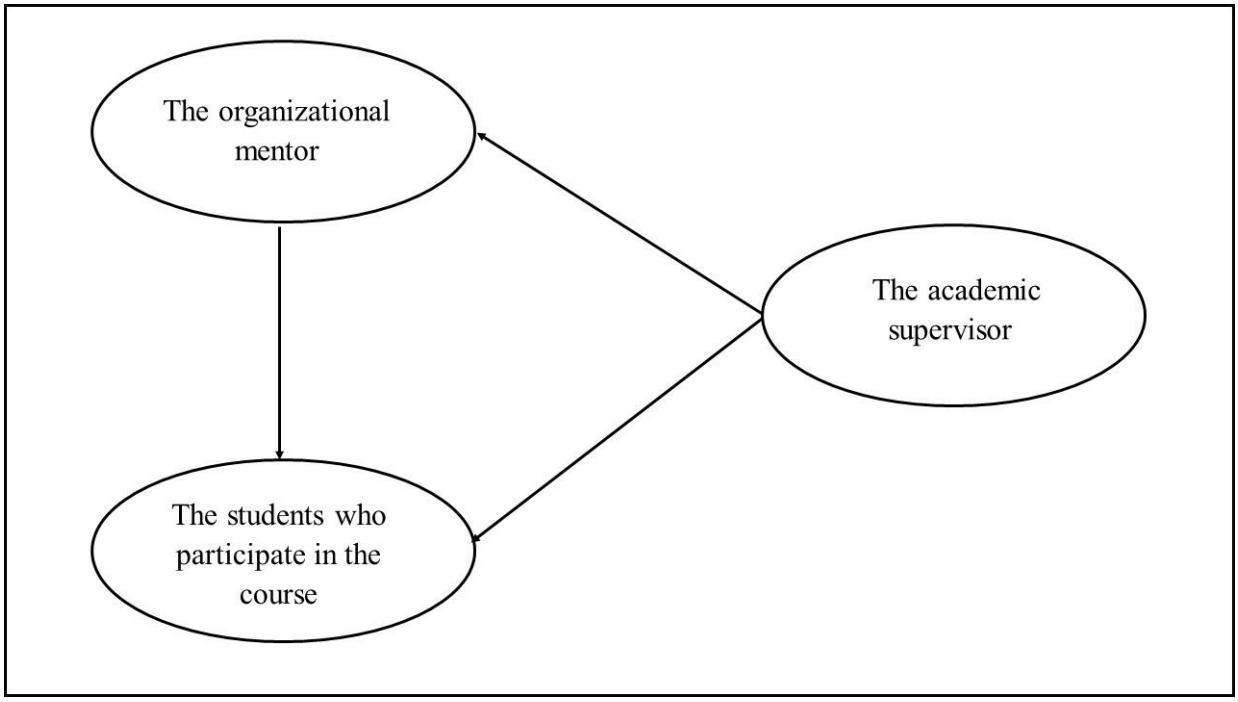

Figure 2. The interrelations between the three main components of the internship and learning process

The focus of learning and the leader of the internship is the academic supervisor, who outlines the specific program executed in the course. The academic supervisor defines the purposes of the project and of the work process both for the organizational mentor and for the students interning in the organization. In addition, the academic supervisor accompanies the guidance process carried out by the organizational mentor.

The academic supervisor follows a structured process that consists of five stages built cyclically, described in Figure 2 below:

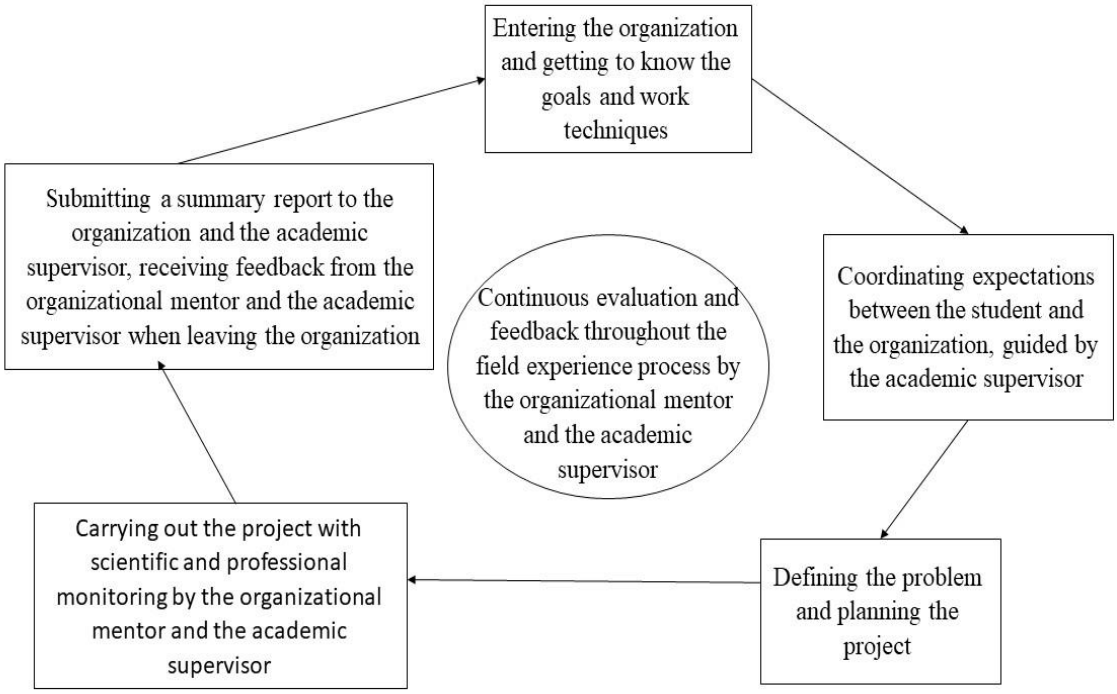

Figure 3. The process of guiding the student in the organization

Figure 2 describes the student's learning process from the stage of entering the organization, through the stage of coordinating expectations, carried out by the student with the organizational mentor. Then, a diagnosis is performed to define the problem/process to be treated in the project run by the students. At the end of the internship year, the students submit a professional summary report to the organization and to the academic supervisor, listing their conclusions and recommendations for improvement in the organization. The learning ends with feedback provided to the students both by the academic supervisor and by the organizational mentor, about their manner of work in the project and the quality of the final product.

The products of the experiential learning are predefined and divided into three main parts, as described in Figure 3 below:

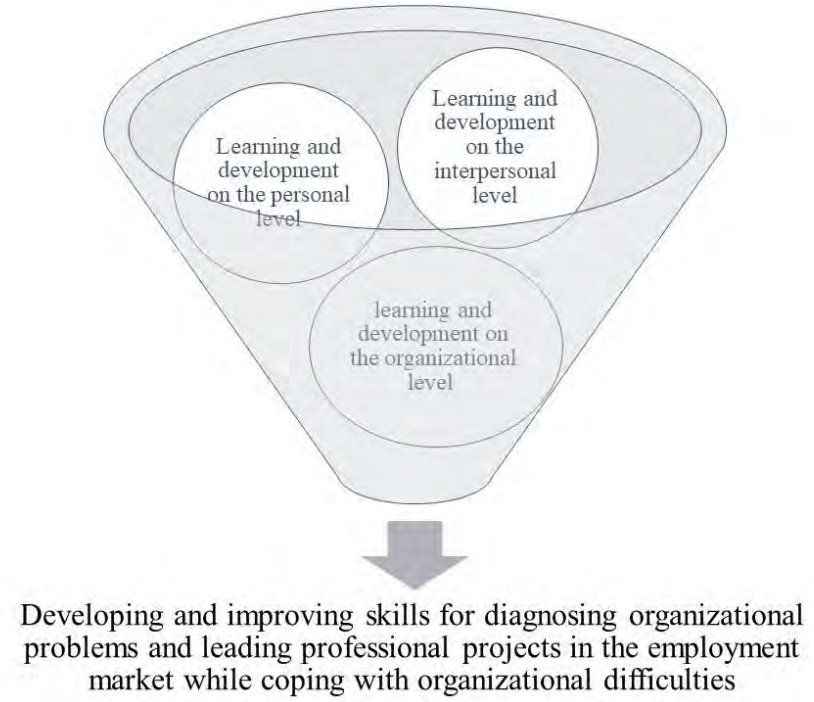

Figure 4. Products of the field experience year

The students' final goal is to be able to diagnose organizational problems and to lead an organizational project. The learning process is aimed at development and learning on the individual level. This means that each student who participates in the project will acquire skills and knowledge on a personal level. Students also acquire understanding of teamwork and project leading processes as well as of organizational processes experienced in the organization. While carrying out the project the student learns to handle difficulties that arise while carrying out the project.

3. The Main Research Questions in the Current Study Were:

1. How do students of management at the academic college's school of management evaluate the learning process in the practical internship course during the Covid-19 crisis?
2. How are they impacted by the learning process via the remote learning method (Zoom)?

4. Research Methodology

4.1 The research Population

The research population consisted of undergraduate students in their third and last year of studies (Moghaddam, 2014; Rothman & Sisman, 2016). The students participated in experiential learning via internship-integrating courses constituting a unique program for practical learning at the academic college's management school. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the students participated in virtual meetings with their organizational mentor and academic supervisor for experiential learning via Zoom, as their primary communication tool due to pandemic restrictions. The academic college, located, in northern Israel, has about 2,500 students, of whom about 709 study in the School of Management. Most students are women (about 60%). In addition, the students belong to diverse cultures: 61% Jews, 22% Muslim, 9% Druze, and 4% Bedouin (the latter of whom are all women). This diverse group was chosen as the research population because it reflects the distribution of the entire Israeli population. Furthermore, the current research sample allows a comprehensive look at the contribution of the practical training course to different populations. In the 2020/21 school year, 150 students from the School of Management participated in the practical learning course and constituted the research group.

4.2 Instrument Construction

The procedure of developing the survey instrument was comprised of two standard steps: First, identifying relevant instruments via a literature review combined with information from focus groups of students who participate in experimental studies and, second, pre-testing of an initial instrument to arrive at relevant items for the ultimate instrument. The first step identified two potential instruments (Meijer et al., 2011; Parasuraman et al., 1985), their

measurements were analyzed, and the compatibility with the theoretical definitions of the constructs in the research model developed in the present study was assessed (Figure 4), following Churchill's (1979) instructions. This yielded an initial survey questionnaire with 27 items and the most appropriate scales for the model's constructs, with the specific characteristics of the experimental program at the academic college in northern Israel.

The pre-testing in the second step confirmed that all the questionnaire's items were clear and thus the scales for the four dimensions of our model could be finalized (MacKenzie & Podsakoff, 2012). For this purpose, students and college lecturers were asked to review the questionnaire and add comments or note clarity issues. Using this final instrument, an online survey was conducted to collect data in order to test the research hypotheses. The survey methodology is used to collect respondent data. Online surveys provide an accessible, effective, and efficient way of assessing respondent perceptions and attitudes (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007; Wright, 2005) and are usually appropriate when broader skills, points of view, or knowledge are sought (Graziano & Raulin, 1993; Wright, 2005). They are often used to study educational and psychological issues.

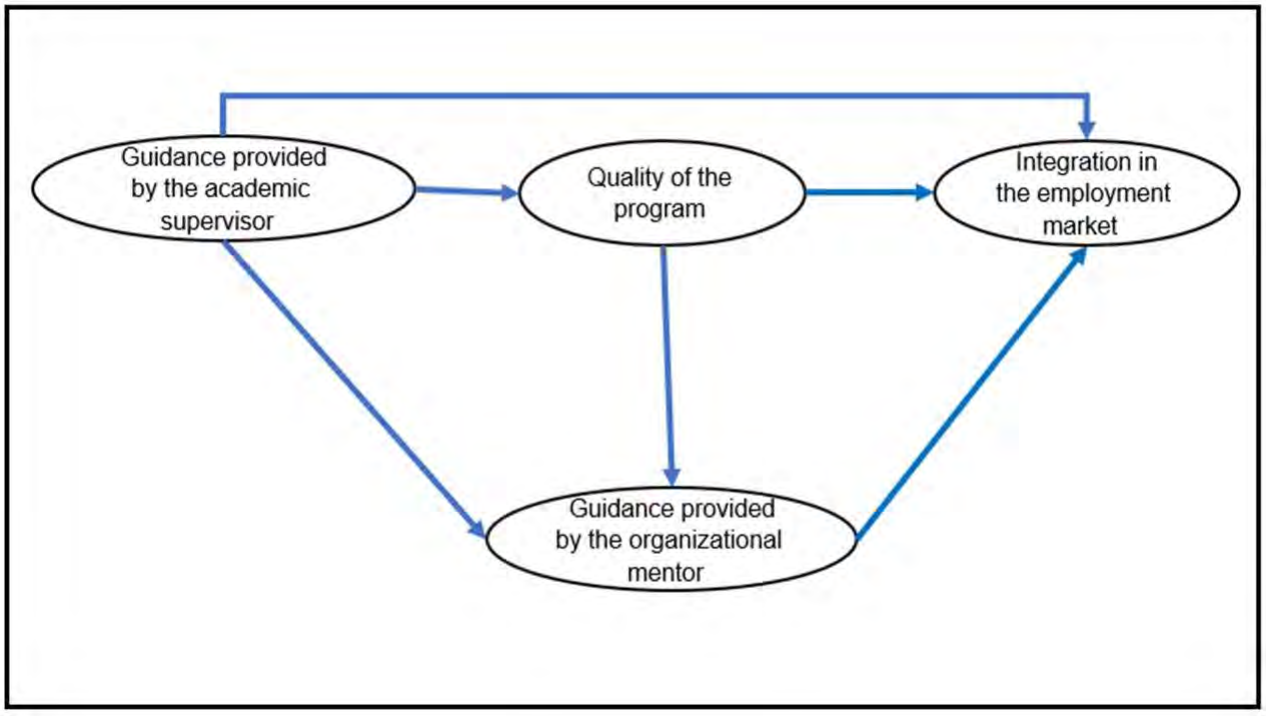

Figure 5. The research model

Responses to the questionnaire items were provided on a five-point Likert scale anchored from "very low" to "very high". One group of items measured the quality of the program and contained six items. This construct aimed to measure the quality of the program as manifested by imparting management skills and work values while adhering to an effective and professional course program. Another group of items measured the guidance provided by the academic supervisor. This part contained twelve items. The purpose of this construct was to measure the guidance through professional aspects such as conveying the material, quality of work via Zoom, and personal aspects such as availability to the students, answering personal requests, and providing attention. Four groups of items measured the guidance provided by the organizational mentor. This construct aimed to measure the quality, availability, and contribution to the development of teamwork among the students when most of the communication and collaboration was conducted via Zoom. The last three groups of items measured integration in the employment market. This construct aimed to expose students, some of whom were not employed, to work characteristics and requirements of employees.

4.3 Data Collection

The instrument was publicized using Google Docs and it was distributed electronically. All 150 students received an email at the end of the semester. A short introduction explained the importance of accurate responses and of reflecting the student's true perceptions, while focusing attention on the purpose and contribution of the study. The questionnaire

was structured in such a way as to maintain the respondent's anonymity and allow students to complete it at a time and place convenient for them. During the data collection period, two reminders were sent to students. In order to allow students to ask questions and increase the response percentage, the researchers joined the Zoom sessions of the practical learning course groups, where students were allowed to ask questions, and the researchers assured them that the data collected would be kept confidential.

5. Research Model

The research model developed in this section (Figure 5) describes the relationships among the guidance provided by the academic supervisor, the quality of the program, the guidance provided by the organizational mentor, and integration in the employment market. The research model examines the potential moderating effects of the quality of the program and the quality of the organization on integration in the employment market.

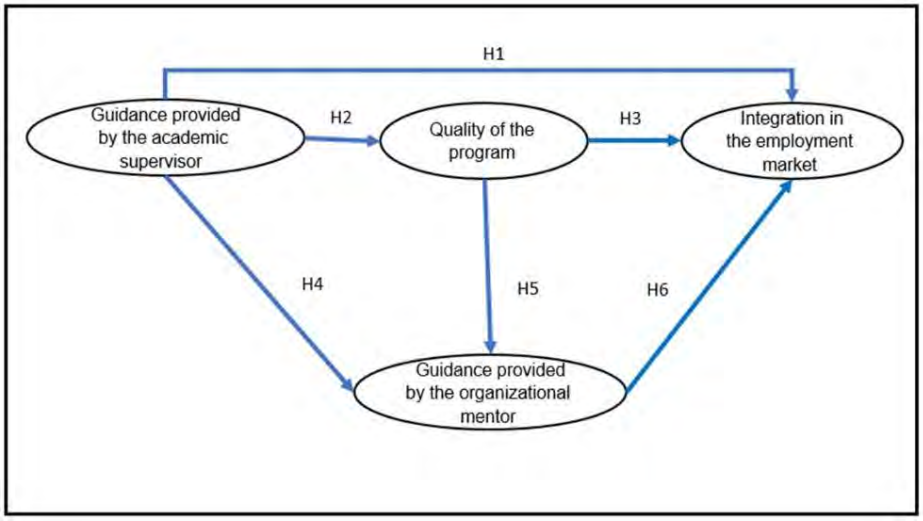

Figure 6. Research model and hypotheses

Control variables

Workplace experience and gender were included in the research model as control variables. Experience was measured by continuous years. Gender was measured by a binary 0 or 1 variable indicating whether the respondent was male (=0) or female (=1).

6. Results

To measure the research model, a list of 16 items was compiled to measure integration in the employment market. Respondents whose percentage of unaddressed items was over 26% or who had a single constant answer were excluded. This screening process yielded a total of 95 responses (approximately 67% response rate).

6.1 Descriptive Statistics

Background information gathered from the respondents indicated that 65.51% were female and 34.48% male. More than 82% of the respondents had five years of employment experience (Table 1). Thus, the data collected incorporated views of students from various organizations with diverse employment experience. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the following constructs: the guidance provided by the academic supervisor, the quality of the program, the guidance provided by the organizational mentor, integration in the employment market, workplace experience, and gender. The guidance provided by the academic supervisor had the highest mean (4.23), with a distribution of 1 SD. The students highly evaluated the lecturer and perceived the lecturer as important for their success. The quality of the program achieved a medium-high mean (3.52), with a distribution of 1.22 SD. The guidance provided by the organizational mentor achieved a medium-high mean (3.63), with a distribution of 1.23 SD. Integration in the employment market achieved a medium mean (3.08), with a distribution of 1.26 SD, probably because most of the students had a mean initial workplace experience of 9.51 years. Experience reflected the total number of employment years and was used to control the variance associated with experience. Gender was recorded as a binary variable that ascribed a value of 1 to females and 0 to males, to control for the variance associated with gender.

Table 1. Characteristics of the research sample

Characteristic (Valid N)	Frequency	Percent
Gender (90)		
Female	59	65.60%
Male	31	34.40%
Experience		
1	3	3.45%
2	2	2.30%
3	5	5.75%
4	3	3.45%
5	10	11.49%
6	11	12.64%
7	8	9.20%
8	10	11.49%
10	9	10.34%
12	4	4.60%
13	4	4.60%
14	3	3.45%
15	5	5.75%
17	1	1.15%
20	1	1.15%
22	5	5.75%
25	2	2.30%
30	1	1.15%

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

	N	Min	Maxi	Mean	Std. Dev.
QOP	91	1	5	3.52	1.22
GAS	91	1	5	4.25	1.00
GOM	91	1	5	3.63	1.23
IEM	90	1	5	3.08	1.26
Experience	84	1	30	9.51	6.088
Gender	87	0	1	0.66	0.478

Note: Quality of the program (QOP); guidance provided by the academic supervisor (GAS); guidance provided by the organizational mentor (GOM); integration in the employment market (IEM)

6.2 Measurement Model

Second-generation statistical covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM AMOS) was used in this study to test the hypotheses. SEM analysis involves the simultaneous evaluation of multiple variables and their relationships. Perhaps the most important strength of SEM is that the associations between numerous latent constructs can be examined to reduce the error in the model (Hair et al., 2014). CB-SEM models "enable more complex and comprehensive analysis than with first-generation methods" (Hair et al., 2014, p. 45). SEM has the statistical ability to test the causal relationships between constructs with multiple measurement items (Hair et al., 2016; Lowry & Gaskin, 2014).

Since the number of factors to be used in the model has a strong theoretical background and knowledge of the theory, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) with four factors was executed (Field, 2009; Suhr, 2006). The results show that the four-factor model fits the data well ($\chi2$=162.39, $\chi2$ /df=1.65, RMSEA=0.08, CFI=0.956, TLI=0.93) and is judged to confirm a good fitting model (Byrne, 2011; Gaski, 2017; Hair et al., 2014). Table 3 represents the values for composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and Cronbach's alpha for each of the constructs in the measurement model. All composite reliability values were well above 0.70, as Segars (1997) recommended, which shows that the measurement items represent the respective constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). All average variance

extracted values were considerably above the 0.50 threshold, based on the criteria of Fornell and Larcker (1981), which shows that the variance captured by the construct was greater than the variance due to measurement error. Table 4 represents the unstandardized indicator weights and standardized indicator loadings. The 1's attributed assigned to one of each set of indicator weights "represent a fixed value of 1; as such, these indicator loadings were not estimated" (Byrne, 2013, p. 33). Assessment of this unstandardized result revealed all indicators loadings to be both adequate and statistically significant (Byrne, 2011). Table 4 displays the standardized values for indicator loadings. The results showed that all indicator loadings were above 0.70 (Gefen et al., 2000), demonstrating the convergent validity of the constructs. In addition, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were above 0.7, based on Nunnally's (1978) recommendation, indicating adequate scale reliabilities (Peterson, 1994). Average variance extracted values for those constructs (Table 3) confirm the discriminant validity of the constructs.

Table 3. Standardized correlation matrices

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	AVE	CR	1	2	3	4
(1) QOP	0.895	0.648	0.843	**0.805**			
(2) GOM	0.931	0.858	0.948	0.416**	**0.965**		
(3) GAS	0.954	0.778	0.961	0.222*	0.182	**0.882**	
(4) IEM	0.928	0.798	0.731	0.795**	0.453**	0.041	**0.893**

Note: Pearson correlation coefficients are presented with the square roots of AVE on the diagonal; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; Quality of the program (QOP); guidance provided by the academic supervisor (GAS); guidance provided by the organizational mentor (GOM); integration in the employment market (IEM)

Table 4. Item wording, weight, and loading.

Item	Weights	Loading	T-Statistic
QOP2	0.842	0.807	9.68***
QOP5	1.012	0.906	11.695***
QOP6	1	0.87	
GOM1	1.049	0.873	11.66***
GOM2	1.157	0.96	13.668***
GOM3	1	0.875	
GAS1	0.823	0.838	11.915***
GAS5	0.994	0.933	15.42***
GAS6	1	0.93	
GAS7	1.266	0.907	12.632***
GAS9	1.241	0.936	13.588***
GAS10	1	0.864	
GAS11	0.852	0.738	8.746***
IEM3	0.996	0.841	10.829***
IEM2	1.311	0.898	12.41***
IEM1	1.23	0.871	11.562***

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; Quality of the program (QOP); guidance provided by the academic supervisor (GAS); guidance provided by the organizational mentor (GOM); integration in the employment market (IEM)

The risk of Common Method Bias (CMB), which may occur when applying one method to measure all constructs (Burton-Jones & Straub Jr, 2004; MacKenzie & Podsakoff, 2012), as in the present study, was mitigated in two ways (MacKenzie & Podsakoff, 2012; Podsakoff, 2003). First, following MacKenzie and Podsakoff (2012), we applied standard instrument design, procedural protocols, and appropriate treatments such as a cover story and pilot test. Then, the data collected in the online survey were estimated using Harman's one-factor test (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). Since the exploratory factor analysis extracted three factors, of which one explained most of the variance (55.8%), CMB could not be ruled out. Then, a common latent factor (CLF) test was used and compared with standardized regression weights with and without CLF (Archimi et al., 2018; Podsakoff, 2003). The differences between the regression weights were greater than 0.200. Thus, we retained the CLF and proceeded to the structural model (Gaski, 2017).

6.3 Structural Model

The structural model was estimated using the maximum likelihood estimation (MLE) technique (Yoo & Morris, 2015). The standardized path coefficients and squared multiple correlations are shown in Figure 7 and Table 5. Guidance provided by the academic supervisor (GAS) accounted for 8.2% of the variance in the quality of the program (QOP). QOP accounted for 19.5% of the variance in guidance provided by the organizational mentor (GOM), and both accounted for 60.1% of the variance in integration in the employment market (IEM). The standardized path coefficients in the structural model supported most of the hypotheses. The path coefficient associated with H1 was not statistically significant. The path coefficient associated with H2, suggesting that GAS is positively correlated with QOP, was statistically significant ($t=2.029$, $p<0.05$). Also the path coefficient associated with H3, suggesting that QOP is positively correlated with IEM, was statistically significant ($t=6.236$, $p<0.001$). The path coefficient associated with H4 was not statistically significant. The path coefficient associated with H5, suggesting that QOP is positively correlated with GOM, was statistically significant ($t=3.186$, $p<0.01$). The path coefficient associated with H5, suggesting that GOM is positively correlated with IEM, was statistically significant ($t=1.997$, $p<0.05$). The effect of the control variables experience and gender was not statistically significant.

Following Baron and Kenny (1986) and Zhao et al. (2010), the mediation between QOP and IEM by GOM was examined via a bootstrap mediation analysis process (Preacher & Hayes, 2004) and found only complementary mediation for guidance provided by the organizational mentor, of five possible mediation categories noted by Baron and Kenny (1986). First, the indirect effect path from QOP to GOM ($\alpha=0.4080$) and the indirect effect path from GOM to IEM ($\beta=0.1749$) were positive and statistically significant. The combined indirect effect ($\alpha * \beta=0.0713$) was also statistically significant. Second, the direct effect path from the QOP to IEM ($c=0.8516$) was positive and statistically significant. These findings suggested that the QOP has both a direct effect and an indirect effect (mediated by the GOM) on IEM.

Table 5. Summary of the structural model results

Hypothesis	Path	Path Coefficient	Standard Error	T-statistic
H1	GAS-->IEM	-0.586	0.493	-1.189
H2	GAS--> QOP	1.190	0.587	2.029*
H3	QOP -->IEM	0.795	0.128	6.236***
H4	GAS -->GOM	0.550	0.476	1.156
H5	QOP-->GOM	0.364	0.114	3.186**
H6	GOM -->IEM	0.219	0.110	1.997*
Control	GENDER -->WORK	-0.056	0.190	-0.297
Control	EXPERIENCE -->WORK	0.004	0.015	0.243

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; Quality of the program (QOP); guidance provided by the academic supervisor (GAS); guidance provided by the organizational mentor (GOM); integration in the employment market (IEM)

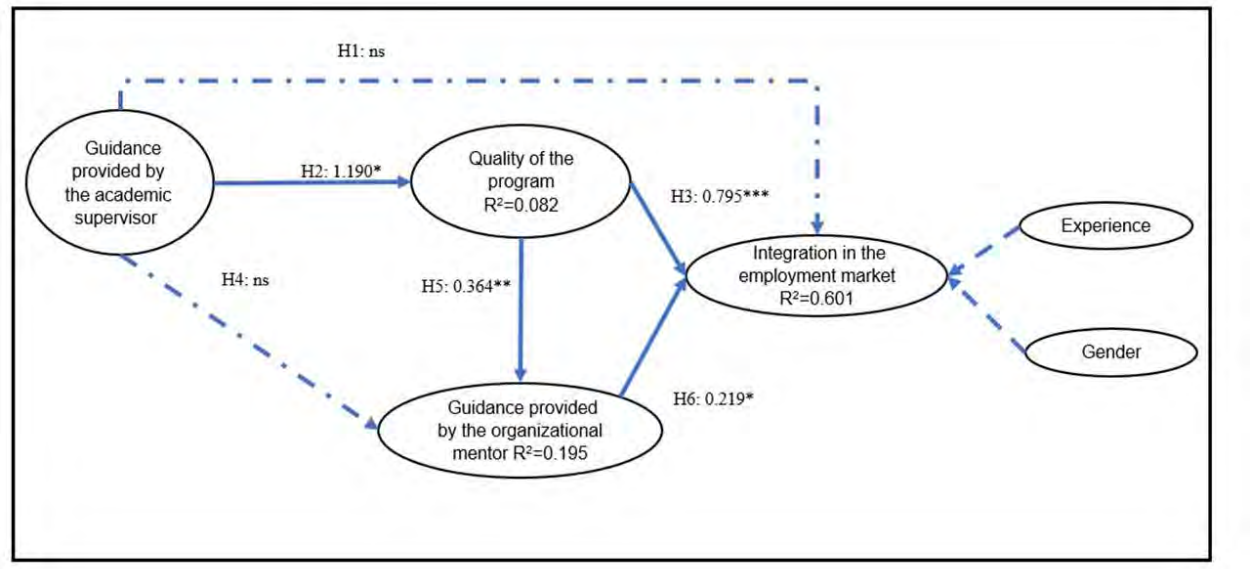

Figure 7. Structural model results

Note: The path coefficients for the effects of gender and experience on integration in the employment market are presented in Table 5; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; ns– nonsignificant ($p > 0.05$).

7. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the benefits and limitations of using a digital platform to offer management field experience activities remotely, as well as to evaluate the quality of guidance provided by the academic supervisor and the organizational mentor in developing students' managerial skills during the Covid-19 period.

The Covid-19 period and the restrictions it imposed made engaging in experiential learning particularly challenging (Stansell, 2020). Thus, this study examined the effectiveness of experiential learning during the Covid-19 period from the perspective of undergraduate students of management. In the following paragraphs we shall analyze the findings regarding each of the correlations examined in the model:

Correlation between the guidance provided by the academic supervisor and the quality of the program – H2

This study found that the guidance provided by the academic supervisor has an important contribution to the success of the internship program. Researchers advocating this contention claimed that a well-built internship will generate a platform that is conducive to first-rate supervision (Rangan & Natarajarathinam, 2014). We, however, found that the guidance provided by the academic supervisor predicts the quality of the entire program. This may stem from the uniqueness manifested in the centrality of the personal feedback provided by the academic supervisor to students throughout the school year. As in the research conducted by Narayanan et al. (2010), Kolb (1984), and Zopiatis and Constanti (2012), at the academic college the supervisor's feedback is emphasized as a significant part of the internship program. Narayanan et al. (2010) claimed that meaningful feedback on the internship provides a basis for goal-guided processes and an ongoing indication of the student's success. Due to the centrality of the academic supervisor and in order to ensure optimal performance of these tasks, academic supervisors are selected carefully.

Correlation between the quality of the program and integration in the employment market – H3

This study found that a worthy internship program contributes to students' integration in management roles within the employment market, sometimes even in the very organizations where the internship was held. Previous studies too have demonstrated this association, for instance Moghaddam (2014) found that students who participated in an experience-based educational program said that it had helped them acquire values important for the business world. The topic was confirmed and found to enhance students' ability to become integrated in the management world, on the assumption that management is a skill that can be learned when combining an internship (Gruver & Miller, 2011;

Holman & Mumford, 2001). Hence, recognizing the practical contribution of internship programs, researchers have defined the features of first-rate experience-based educational programs as well-structured programs that meet the needs of all stakeholders (Bourner & Ellerker, 1998). Indeed, the academic college's school of management operates a well-structured experience-based educational program that provides students with a platform for implementing the skills that will be required of them subsequently in the employment market.

Correlation between the guidance provided by the academic supervisor and by the organizational mentor (no correlation) – H4

Students in experience-based educational programs receive guidance from two figures: (1) the lecturer at the academic institution and (2) the organizational mentor. Both accompany the student throughout the internship (Kolb, 1984). Hite and Bellizzi (1986) claimed that one of the components that defines a successful internship is combined guidance by both the academic supervisor and the organizational mentor (Zopiatis & Constanti, 2012) and that the guidance provided by both will affect the success of the program. The current study found, as stated, that the most meaningful element affecting the quality of the program is the guidance provided by the academic supervisor, who connects between the student and the organization and determines the depth and nature of the project implemented by the student in the organization. Therefore, the combined impact of both figures does not bear equal weight, but rather the academic supervisor is the most significant. We explored the correlation between the guidance provided by the academic supervisor and that provided by the organizational mentor and did not find this association to be significant. This may be a result of the unique period in which the study was conducted, which required social distancing and resulted in e-learning (on Zoom). The transition to e-learning was carried out instantly once the pandemic erupted and left no room for organizing, training, and instruction, and in practice lecturers at the college received no advance preparation for this type of studies. Park and Jones (2021); Raaper and Brown (2020) claim that in order for a virtual internship to succeed it is important to undergo appropriate technological preparation and to train organizational mentors for remote mentoring while also preparing the students and imparting necessary technological skills and communication skills for distance learning. In this situation, the interaction between the academic supervisor and the organizational mentor was reduced, negatively affecting their relationship.

Correlation between the guidance provided by the organizational mentor and integration in the employment market - H6

Similar to Kolb (1984) and Beard and Morton (1998), we too found that the more the organizational mentor is present during the project, the more the internship is perceived by the student as practical and as granting applied tools for future integration in organizations. During the Covid period, most of the encounters with the organizational mentor and/or representatives took place via Zoom and the students were rarely present at the organizations. In the current study we discovered that the virtual communication did not detract from the quality of mentoring in the organization as it did from the quality of academic supervision. It appears that organizational mentors are more proficient in this method of communication than academic supervisors and therefore work with them proceeded well. Park and Jones (2021) as well contended that despite the difference between actual physical mentoring in the organization and virtual mentoring, the quality of mentoring by contact people in the organizations was not affected and was perceived as the most meaningful element for the success of the learning process. In their study they noted the significance of the clarity and frequency of communication and feedback by contact people in the organization. Hence, in our study we found a significant correlation between the guidance provided by organizational mentors and its contribution to integration in the employment market.

Correlation between the quality of the program and guidance provided by organizational mentors – H5

The current study found an association between the quality of the program and the guidance provided by the organizational mentor. Rangan and Natarajarathinam (2014) also linked the quality of the program to the guidance of both the academic supervisor and the organizational mentor. They claimed that a well-structured internship program will generate good guidance and a relationship between the organization's representative and the academic supervisor and students. Since the experience-based program at the academic college is a structured program that combines within the learning process visits to an organization, structured mentoring conversations with representatives of the organization, and regular reports to the organizational mentors, this program allows the organizational mentor to leave an impression and to provide the students with applied tools that will serve them subsequently.

Guidance provided by the organizational mentor mediates the association between the quality of the program and students' integration in the employment market - H5+H6

Nonetheless, guidance provided by the organizational mentor also mediates the effect of the quality of the program on integration in the employment market. Thus, guidance provided by the academic supervisor may enhance the quality of the program, with the aim of promoting students' integration in the employment market, but the effect of the program's quality on integration in the employment market is boosted concurrently by the guidance provided by the organizational mentor.

An example is when students choose to avoid utilizing the guidance provided, for instance via less communication or not showing up at the organization. Under such circumstances, it will be difficult for the organizational mentor to collaborate and to share information and experience with the students, thus diminishing students' integration in the employment market. Hence, these findings provide practical guidance for students participating in a unique program for experience-based learning in diverse organizations.

Correlation between the guidance provided by the academic supervisor and integration in the employment market (no correlation) – H1

The current study examined the association between the guidance provided by the academic supervisor and the student's perception of the program's contribution to his or her future integration in the employment market, and found an insignificant correlation. Here too, similar to the previous section, this may be explained by the unique times in which the study was conducted, which required social distancing and demanded e-learning (via Zoom). This might have affected the contribution of the academic supervisor to imparting skills such as experiencing teamwork, communication with contact people in the organization, and facing an audience, which are important for students' integration in the employment market and could otherwise have been met through interpersonal face-to-face encounters between the academic supervisor and the students. Therefore, the influence of the academic supervisor on students' ability to become integrated in the employment market is not significant. Graduates with professional experience in the employment market may benefit more from academic supervision than young students who have not yet entered the employment market. Such a finding was reported by Allred et al. (2021), who found that students with experience in the employment market reported a greater impact of the study program on their skills. This variable was not explored in the current study and should be addressed in future research.

8. Conclusion

This study further defines the significance and contribution of the experience-based educational program for students during the Covid period, despite the social distancing and e-learning. The contribution of this study focuses on three main areas presented in the research model. First, the study emphasizes the significance of the guidance provided by the academic supervisor for establishing the quality of the internship program and consequently improving students' perceptions of its contribution to their integration in the employment market. Moreover, we found that the contribution of the organizational mentor diminished during the Covid period compared to that shown in former studies addressing combined guidance by an academic supervisor and organizational mentor. In the current state of affairs, organizational mentoring depends on the quality of the program outlined by the academic supervisor. In addition, an innovative mediating effect of the organizational mentor was found, one that generates an association between the quality of the program and its contribution to integration in the employment market. These results were further validated in the period of the study, as it was conducted in the midst of the Covid pandemic, when academic institutions were required to show flexibility and adaptation, leading to distance learning methods that were not previously customary. The research conclusions indicate that distance learning contains opportunities for new developments in the experience-based education of students in internship programs and that institutions of higher education should implement the lessons learned from the research.

9. Limitations

While this study identified key associations between the guidance provided by the academic supervisor, the quality of the program, the guidance provided by the organizational mentor, and integration in the employment market, it is not without limitations. The first limitation concerns the Covid-19 period. During the 15 months of Covid-19, higher education shifted to distance learning (Cicha et al., 2021). The distance learning format required students to learn new skills such as communication and interaction via a virtual environment in a short period, under conditions of uncertainty and pressure. The second limitation of this study concerns the methodology used to collect the data. Opinions and beliefs regarding students' evaluation of the practical experience course were determined in a retrospective view of the Covid-19 period. The data collected utilized a cross-sectional survey design, collecting data

from students in different departments at a single point in time. As such, the dynamics of longitudinal processes cannot be analyzed using this methodology. It is insufficient for establishing a cause and effect relationship rather than associations between variables (Fink, 2003; Price & Murnan, 2004). The third limitation of this study concerns the second-generation structural equation modeling (SEM) technique applied to estimate the data (CB-SEM AMOS). According to Hair et al. (2014), causality must be governed by theoretical grounds, whereas the CB-SEM AMOS technique only determines correlations among constructs rather than and not causality. The guidance provided by the academic supervisor was via distance learning while the guidance provided by the organizational mentor changed dynamically according to pandemic restrictions, from distance mentoring meetings to face-to-face mentoring meetings.

10. Directions for Future Research

Future research may address the above limitations for a more complete understanding of the associations among the guidance provided by the academic supervisor, the quality of the program, and the guidance provided by the organizational mentor. Because the analysis in this study covered the early stages of Covid-19, during which higher education transitioned to distance learning (Cicha et al., 2021), future research could be channeled to carefully investigating the impact of distance learning on the practical internship course via a diverse range of questions. Additional research could benefit from investigating distance learning according to the projects' characteristics. For instance, a logistics project requires physical presence at the organization, compared to a strategic project that allows remote independent work.

It is advisable to conduct the same research after the Covid-19 period for a longitudinal comparison in order to distinguish between two periods: distance learning vs. frontal or hybrid learning, and to further understand the effect of the practical internship during and after Covid-19 on research performance and contribution. The research should also explore the impact of students' attitudes on new and advanced technological internships. Additional research may address the effect of practical internship on students' integration in the employment market one or two years after graduation, focusing on their teamwork experience, management capabilities, placement in the organization, problem solving capabilities, and rank and salary.

The last issue is the research methodology, a cross-sectional survey at one point in time at an academic college by collecting data from various academic institutions in Israel and overseas. While analysis of data from a single college controls for potential effects of college-related variables, the findings may be affected by the idiosyncrasies of the academic college's practices that are not common in other Israeli colleges or overseas. This reduces possible generalization of the results. For this reason, future research could increase the sample size by collecting data from other academic institutions as well as utilizing mixed methods such as observation, in-depth interviews, and questionnaires.

The final recommendation for further research is related to organizational mentoring and managers' workplace experience. An organizational mentor with little experience may encounter difficulties working with students compared to an experienced manager. In addition, it is necessary to investigate the manager's suitability for the practical internship. For example, what experience do managers have with mentoring students? To what extent do managers know how to manage a team? Does the mentor have training abilities? In addition, mentors are required to understand the requirements, set tasks for the practical internship, and collaborate with the academic supervisor.

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