Crossing Boundaries: Connectivity-Oriented Internship Pedagogy in Hospitality & Tourism Education

Abstract

This study examines how compulsory internships in Austrian tourism and HRM bachelor programmes translate academic learning into workplace competence and what didactic mechanisms can enhance the connectedness of learning spaces. 115 student reflection reports (65 Tourism, 50 HRM) from internship placements completed in 2023–25 were analyzed. A qualitative content analysis produced five coding categories covering critical and positive experiences, knowledge transfer, skills development and company advice. It was found that structured onboarding, mentoring and feedback were rare; where present they markedly accelerated learning and engagement. Theory–practice transfer peaked in complex, goal-aligned tasks and dipped in routine service work, with HRM students reporting greater misalignment than Tourism students. Triadic learning agreements, trained workplace mentors and portfolio-based reflection are recommended to transform internships into hybrid learning spaces that systematically connect curricular outcomes with real workplace demands.

Keywords: *Connectivity-oriented internship, hybrid learning spaces, workplace-university education*

Track: *6 Educational Innovations*

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Introduction

Internships are a cornerstone of contemporary tourism and hospitality programmes, providing the crucial bridge between theoretically driven university courses and the realities of professional practice. In most curricula they are compulsory, allowing students to test, adapt and deepen classroom knowledge in authentic settings and thus enhance competence and employability (Narayanan, Olk & Fukami, 2010). Conceived as work-integrated learning (WIL), internships should promote "recontextualisation"—the transfer and adaptation of academic concepts to the complexity of professional situations—through structured placements and qualified supervision (Tynjälä, Virolainen, Heikkinen & Virtanen, 2020). This rationale underpins calls for close university–industry collaboration and for the German/Austrian principle of "Lernortverzahnung," the deliberate interlocking of campus and workplace learning sites (Kaiser & Kaminski, 2011; Ostendorf, Dimai, Ehrlich & Hautz, 2018). Despite this clear pedagogical logic, genuine integration remains difficult. Critics contend that internships often compensate for theory-heavy curricula rather than complement them (Kaiser & Kaminski, 2011), leaving students to navigate the persistent "theory–practice gap". Tourism scholars consistently document mismatches between classroom preparation and workplace reality (e.g. van 't Klooster, van Wijk, Go & van Rekom, 2008). When interns are given duties unrelated to their studies or skill level, boredom and frustration replace meaningful learning (Dimai, Ehrlich & Hautz, 2015). Weak mentoring, undefined objectives and divergent expectations among students, faculty and industry supervisors further undermine learning (Bonnes, Binkert & Goller, 2022). Current discourse therefore argues that workplaces must become more than mere testbeds; internships require reflection, guided supervision and explicit pedagogy to transform knowledge across contexts (Tynjälä et al., 2020).

Research Gap

Although the benefits of internships are widely acknowledged, the mechanisms that weave university and workplace learning into a coherent system remain under-researched. Hospitality and tourism studies typically measure outcomes—satisfaction, competence gains, career intentions—but seldom examine the pedagogical design and collaborative processes that could deepen learning (Ferreras-Garcia, Hernández-Lara & Serradell-López, 2019). Even when competence growth is reported, misalignments between academic preparation and industry expectations persist (Bonnes, Binkert & Goller, 2022). Employers' views on desired competencies and their coordination with faculty mentors are particularly under-represented, leaving practical frameworks for shared objectives, communication and evaluation underdeveloped (Ferreras-Garcia et al., 2019). Responding to this deficit, the present study investigates the boundary between academic and workplace learning and proposes concrete strategies for enhanced "Lernortverzahnung" in bachelor programmes. Building on recommendations for explicit learning outcomes, formal university–employer agreements and mentor training (Ferns, Rowe & Zegwaard, 2022), it conducts a qualitative content analysis of undergraduate internship reports. Student narratives provide rich evidence of where and how classroom knowledge is recontextualised, which technical, soft or industry-specific skills feel under-prepared, and where support structures succeed or fail (Aggett & Busby, 2011; Ferreras-Garcia et al., 2019). The project also foregrounds structured reflection—through diaries, debrief seminars and guided feedback—as a catalyst for turning experience into transferable knowledge (Tynjälä et al., 2020). By situating its analysis within this reflective-practice lens, the study not only diagnoses shortcomings but also outlines interventions that can be embedded immediately in course design: scaffolded reflection tasks, synchronised assessment rubrics, mentor briefings and post-internship integration workshops.

Against this backdrop, the present study asks: "How, and under what workplace and pedagogical conditions, do compulsory internships in Austrian Tourism and HRM bachelor programmes convert university knowledge into workplace competence?"

Literature Review

This text highlights how successful cooperation between universities and companies, connectivity-oriented internship didactics, and targeted work with portfolios can create a hybrid learning space that sustainably supports the development of students' skills within the framework of their mandatory internships.

Integration of Learning Sites

The combination of university and workplace training promotes the development of skills relevant to the labor market. A prerequisite for high-quality training is effective cooperation between universities and the workplace (Aprea, Sappa & Tenberg, 2020). According to Stenström and Tynjälä (2009), the concept of *"school-workplace connectivity"* encompasses three levels: systemic (macro), organizational (meso), and individual (micro) – in other words, the interaction between institutions, actors, and learning processes (cf. Seufert, 2022). Aprea and Sappa (2015) emphasize three central aspects: a common understanding of the role of teachers in supporting so-called "boundary crossers" (Griffiths & Guile, 2004), concepts for contextualizing theory in practice, and the transfer of knowledge as a bidirectional process between learning locations. This

is based on a coordinated competence profile and coordinated learning process design (Seufert, 2021).

Hybrid learning space: work placement

Individual and cooperative learning is increasingly taking place in virtual educational spaces, which, according to Arnold et al. (2018), function as an interface between technology, didactics, materials, and actions. Protected learning platforms such as learning management systems (LMS) enable the planning and implementation of digitally supported learning processes. In compulsory internships, the meta-learning location of the internship is expanded by such systems and online communities. This creates a hybrid learning space characterized by the interplay of competence development and work structures (Dehnpostel, 2020).

Ostendorf et al. (2018) describe two perspectives: the self-learning of interns and the design of the internship as a didactic enabling space. Within a structured framework, the focus is on informal learning processes that become conscious through reflection (Wittwer & Rose, 2015). A central prerequisite is the willingness of learners to engage in new experiences and to process them reflectively. Interns develop professional, personal, and social skills by performing job-specific tasks and being integrated into operational processes. They encounter new situations and people, whereby openness and trust in dealing with others are central. Emotional experiences promote reflection on one's own behavior (Ostendorf et al., 2018).

From a social constructivist perspective, connectivity is a central didactic principle: learning locations and situations influence each other reciprocally. School knowledge is not simply transferred, but recontextualized as situational practical knowledge - a creative engagement with new contexts (Griffiths & Guile, 2003). This requires close coordination between the university and the company. Digitally supported connectivity creates a unified third space – the hybrid learning space of the professional internship (Dehnpostel, 2019; Edinger & Reimer, 2015) as illustrated in Figure 1.

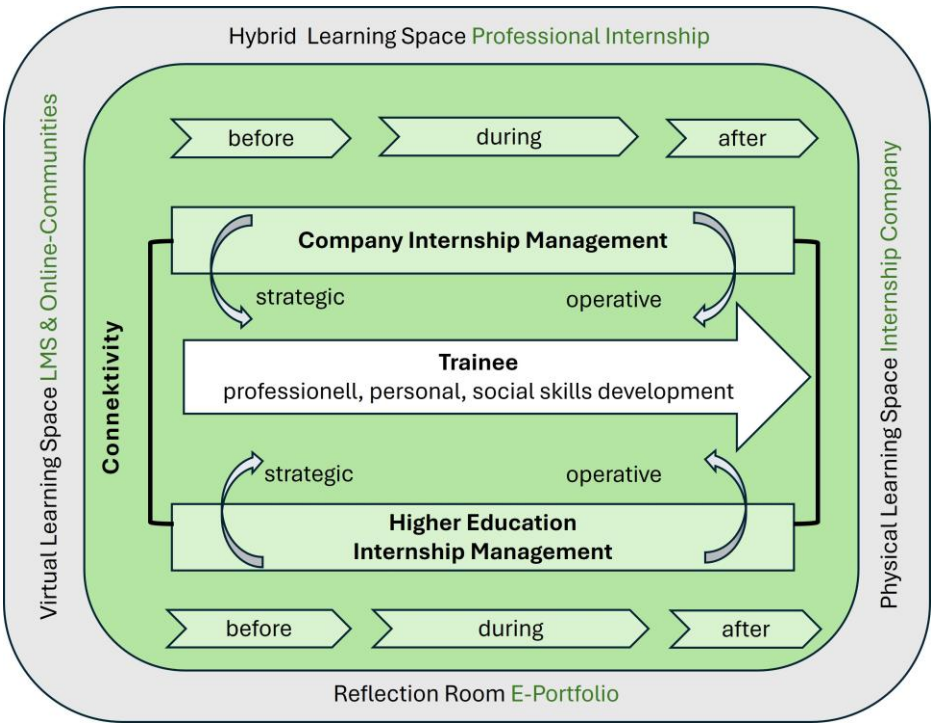

Figure 1. **Hybrid Learning Space Professional Internship** (based on Ostendorf et al., 2018; Arnold, et al., 2018; Dehnpostel, 2020; Pelosi, 2019)

The implementation of connectivity-oriented internship teaching methods requires close coordination between the university and the internship company. This includes networking activities and the appointment of university supervisors who are responsible for didactic and methodological planning and support. A jointly designed learning environment helps students prepare specifically for company requirements. A contact person is also needed at the company to support interns with didactic concepts, strategic planning, and mentoring. Participation in work processes and regular feedback promote self-reflection and open up the learning space (Ostendorf et al., 2018). Reflection spaces enable conscious engagement with one's own learning process and are social places of self-reference (Pelosi, 2019). Hilzensauer (2008) distinguishes between three levels of reflection: learning object (goal achievement), learning action (situational implementation), and learning ability (meta-reflection). E-portfolios serve to document and reflect on individual learning progress and provide space for feedback and competence diagnostics (Volk, Pawelleck & Alean-Kirkpatrick, 2013).

According to Hornung-Prähauser et al. (2007), portfolio work promotes students' independence, personal responsibility, and ability to reflect, as well as the development of action and problem-solving skills. Learning processes are documented, and the student's own profile is sharpened. Baumgartner (2009) distinguishes between reflection, development, and presentation portfolios, which can be combined and used in electronic form as a competency development portfolio (eKEP, see Figure 2) in professional internships (Bauer & Baumgartner, 2012).

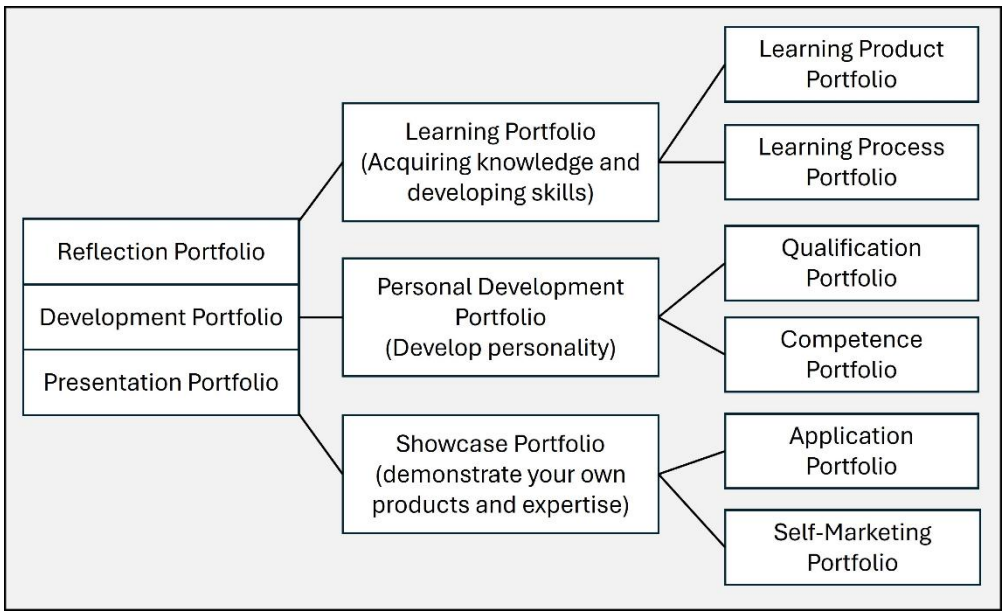

Figure 2. **eKEP in Context of Professional Internship** (based on Bauer & Baumgartner, 2012)

Learning portfolios serve to develop learning products and reflect on the learning process, transitioning into personal development portfolios that document individual learning goals (Baumgartner, Himpsl & Zauchner, 2009; Hilzensauer & Hornung-Prähauser, 2006). Qualification and competence portfolios promote professional and personal development (Baumgartner, 2009). Presentation, application, and self-marketing portfolios make competencies visible to the outside world and support application processes (Bauer & Baumgartner, 2012). E-portfolios enable multimedia presentation, individual rights assignment, and the structured linking of learning objectives, artifacts, and reflection (Hilzensauer & Hornung-Prähauser, 2006; Bauer & Baumgartner, 2012).

Based on theoretical concepts of learning location cooperation, connectivity-oriented internship didactics, and portfolio work, the focus is now on their concrete implementation in a professional context. To gain insights into practical experience, student reports were evaluated qualitatively. The following section on methodology describes the methodological procedure and the approach to analyzing individual learning and reflection processes of students in professional internships.

Methodology

Based on the approach of Aggett & Busby (2011) a qualitative analysis of internship reflection reports was made to examining students' written accounts of their internship experiences. This study aims to reveal how and to what extent knowledge is being recontextualized from the university to the job site and to identify where the support structures are failing or succeeding.

Therefore 115 reflection reports (N=115) from the Bachelor's degree programs in Human Resource Management (50 reflection reports) from the winter semesters 2023/24 and 2024/25 and Tourism Management (65 reflection reports) from the summer semesters 2023 and 2024 were analyzed. (Table 1).

Table 1. **Reflection Reports per Semester and Program**

Study Program	No. of Reports 2023/24	No. of Reports 2024/25
Human Resource Management	27	23
Tourism Management	9	56
Total	36	79

After completing their internship, students from both programs write these reflection reports using appropriate templates and reflect on their various internship experiences and the skills they have acquired. Based on the available templates, five categories were created: Critical experiences, positive experiences, prior knowledge from studies, skills development and recommendations to internship companies (Human Resource Management only).

A total of 50 reflection reports on the internships from the winter semesters 2023/24 and 2024/25 were evaluated for the Human Resource Management study area. Students on the Bachelor's degree course in Human Resource Management complete their work placement of 520 working hours in the 5th semester of their degree course. The activities of the internship company only must be related to Human Resource Management. A total of 65 reflection reports on the work placement from the summer semesters 2023 and 2024 were evaluated for the Tourism Management degree program. Students on the Bachelor's degree course in Tourism Management complete a semester in the form of a work placement of 700 working hours in the 4th semester of their degree course. The choice of internship company is organized by the students themselves. The internship can be completed either within Austria or abroad. The activities or the internship company only must be related to tourism. In contrast to the Human Resource Management course, this leads to a wide variety of different internships in different areas of tourism. From purely operational activities in Service, F&B, House Keeping or Front Office to internships in departments such as Events, Marketing & Sales, Revenue Management, Human Resources and Product Development, and many more. Accordingly, the reflection reports also reflect a wide variety of experiences.

Results

The findings of both programs reveal the following:

Critical Experiences

Reflection reports from Tourism Management and Human Resource Management (HRM) students paint a nearly identical picture of their early internship phase. In both cohorts, a systematic onboarding programme was the exception rather than the rule. Many interns described their first week as a “sink-or-swim” scenario: no handbooks, no job shadowing, and no formal briefing on standard operating procedures. Tourism students, often deployed in service or front-office roles, had to learn hotel software, safety protocols and emergency procedures within hours. Staff structures further complicated matters. Line managers were frequently absent, changed midway through the placement or led with inconsistent styles, leaving interns uncertain about expectations. Feedback—both formative and summative—was “rare to non-existent.” Several Tourism students added that superiors lacked empathy, failed to acknowledge student status and, in isolated cases, displayed discriminatory or disrespectful behaviour. HRM students, meanwhile, lamented that tasks were handed down unsystematically across multiple channels—email, chat and handwritten notes—creating confusion and rework. Tourism interns reported additional pressure from physical working conditions: split shifts, night duties, six-day weeks and limited employee protection—

especially in destinations outside the EU—imposed significant fatigue at the outset. In businesses with multinational teams, language barriers and divergent cultural norms occasionally sparked conflict and misunderstanding, complicating team integration. A number of HRM interns observed that workload peaks were not matched by adequate staffing, making it difficult to meet service standards and causing chronic overtime for permanent staff.

Positive Experiences

Yet the same reports underline that placements can be transformative when autonomy is matched by support. Roughly three-quarters of students characterised their internship as "a steep but rewarding learning curve." Being entrusted with real responsibilities made them feel valued, accelerated skill acquisition and fostered a sense of ownership. Tourism students praised the variety and dynamism of their tasks—co-ordinating events, handling guest complaints, creating itineraries, preparing social-media content and analysing engagement metrics—along with the positive working atmosphere in cohesive teams.

HRM students highlighted the benefits of a "buddy system" introduced in some large corporations: a senior employee volunteered as a day-to-day guide, held weekly coffee-chats and translated corporate jargon. This arrangement reduced anxiety and promoted faster integration. Regular peer check-ins through WhatsApp or Teams channels provided a safe space to crowd-source solutions, share templates and compare performance expectations across departments. Exposure to a global workforce demanded adaptability and broadened their intercultural competence. Both groups identified competent, communicative leaders as a decisive motivational factor: when supervisors provided constructive criticism, shared decision-making and celebrated achievements, interns responded with higher commitment.

Prior Knowledge

Students' ability to transfer university learning was heavily context-specific. Tourism interns assigned to operational floor duties found limited overlap with modules on strategy or revenue management; nevertheless, they applied basics such as service quality measurement, guest psychology, cross-selling techniques and health-and-safety guidelines. Those stationed in marketing, accounting or projects frequently referenced frameworks from lectures on segmentation, break-even analysis, critical-path scheduling and corporate social responsibility, describing the experience as "watching theory crystallise".

HRM interns felt lectures on recruitment and selection prepared them well for reviewing CVs, designing competency-based interview guides and writing inclusive job advertisements. Yet when faced with predictive HR analytics, equal-pay audits or artificial-intelligence screening tools, they realised additional preparation was necessary. Many therefore called for live simulations, company projects and best-practice guest lectures before placement. Across both programmes, group assignments at university were credited with honing soft skills—negotiation, consensus-building, conflict management—that proved invaluable during the internship.

Skill Development

Interns documented a rich portfolio of competence gains. Personal development topped the list: students reported stronger self-discipline, time-management and a clearer sense of career aspiration. Regular collaboration fostered empathy, cultural intelligence and the ability to read

subtle workplace dynamics. Daily interaction with supervisors, guests and external partners honed clarity, tone adaptation and conflict-resolution skills; Tourism students especially refined their capacity to de-escalate complaints in high-pressure situations.

Both groups highlighted resilience: long hours, shifting priorities and resource constraints required mental stamina and the ability to recover rapidly from setbacks. HRM interns enumerated creativity in designing recruitment videos, constructing onboarding checklists, gamifying internal surveys and improving office workflows, whereas Tourism interns referenced logistical planning, crisis handling and precise execution of standard operating procedures. Proficiency with digital tools—property-management systems, customer-relationship software, applicant-tracking systems, spreadsheets and scheduling apps—rounded out the technical skillset.

However, fewer than one-third of HRM reports provided granular evidence of subject-specific knowledge growth, frequently using generic formulations ("deepened my HR insight"). This suggests that clearer learning goals, scaffolded reflection and explicit mentor questioning are needed to enhance self-assessment accuracy.

Recommendation to Internship Companies

Due to the structure of the templates used for the internship reports, this category was only developed for the Human Resource Management study area. The following quotes are examples of the basic understanding expected from internship providers to interns: "*It must be made clear that interns are a valuable resource*". "*A positive internship experience can help to attract qualified junior staff to the company in the long term*". Almost most of them want structured onboarding with a clear introduction to the processes, as well as a mentoring program and fixed contact persons. Furthermore, standardized processes and flexible support. The communication of clear goals for the desired development and associated expectations is described as essential. Regular reflection and feedback meetings on progress, potential and satisfaction in several phases of the internship are mentioned in almost all reports.

Discussion

According to Narayanan et al. (2010) internships serve as a bridge between classroom learning and professional practice. They are designed to enable students to apply academic theories in real-world contexts, thereby strengthening their practical competencies and enhance employability. The results of the content analysis partially confirm this goal. The transfer of prior knowledge and its application to practical problems is strongly dependent on the type of internship, especially for students of tourism management. The more operationally active the students are during the internship, the lower the theory-practice transfer. On the other hand, knowledge acquired during their studies could be put to good use in more complex tasks or activities in specific specialist areas such as marketing, project management or accounting. Students from the human resource management study area felt well prepared for the application process for the internship, but not when it came to applying what they had already learned. The primary focus of theory-practice transfer is on recontextualization (Griffiths & Guile, 2003), which is the ability to bring existing knowledge into new contexts and thus develop new knowledge and social practices. Interns critically and reflectively examine work practices and develop them further together with colleagues (Griffiths & Guile, 2003). Ostendorf (2018) points out that, the internship company must appoint a responsible supervisor to ensure the necessary communication and cooperation in

the work environment. Those responsible for education in the internship company are responsible for didactic design, strategic planning, and actual support of the interns, for example through mentoring. The results reveal that this is not guaranteed in many companies. Often there are no defined contact persons available for the interns. In addition, processes in some companies are not very structured and continuous feedback and reflection meetings rarely take place. Internship companies that emphasize the importance of having contact persons available make it easier for interns to start their internship and provide them with stability and support. At the same time, these companies usually also have a positive team culture, where students are well integrated during their internship and are included as full members. Auffallend ist auch, dass es in zahlreichen Unternehmen keinen strukturierten Onboarding-Prozess gibt. Although according to Dimai et al. (2015) such deliberate integrations efforts are necessary to avoid that intern face problems connecting academic theories with on-the-job tasks, and vice versa. It is also striking that many companies do not have a structured onboarding process. When interns are assigned duties unrelated to their studies or skill level, they often experience boredom and frustration instead of meaningful learning (Dimai et al., 2015). The empirical results also confirm this. It was often noted by students from both fields of study that activities were perceived as meaningless, monotonous and unchallenging. While the expectations of the students from the field of tourism management were generally fulfilled throughout the internship and the time in the company was predominantly perceived as an instructive, enriching and positive experience, the expectations of the interns from the field of human resources management were only fulfilled in a few cases. Subject-related skills development was often only described in general terms in the reflection papers, which is because no clear development goals were defined and communicated at the beginning of the internship, and it was therefore not possible to check whether these goals had been achieved. In general, students on both study programs focused on developing their working methods and personality.

In this analysis, reflection reports from only two years were analyzed. This limits the informative value of the results. To obtain more substantiated results, an analysis of further reflection reports from other years or, in future, an accompanying time series analysis would be useful.

Recommendations and Future Work

To maximise the educational yield of internships in tourism and HRM programmes, universities and host companies must adopt a structured, pedagogically driven framework. A connectivity-oriented model couples academic and workplace learning through deliberate networking and joint goal-setting. Each placement begins with a triadic meeting—student, academic supervisor, company mentor—to translate curricular outcomes into concrete workplace tasks. Agreed competencies, both technical (e.g., guest communication, quality management) and transferable (teamwork, problem-solving), are captured in a learning agreement that specifies tasks, resources and support channels.

The agreement guides continuous self-assessment and scheduled feedback. Mid-term reviews give formative insight, enabling mentors to recalibrate duties if objectives drift. A summative debrief at the close of the internship consolidates learning: students evaluate goal attainment, evidence new skills and articulate links between experience and academic theory, while supervisors provide qualitative commentary for the student's portfolio. Process-oriented supervision—clear competence rubrics, documented feedback and curated reflection—ensures consistency across placements, bolsters engagement and underscores the educational purpose of practical training.

Monitoring responsibility is shared: universities oversee didactic integrity; companies guarantee on-site coaching; together they track competence development against predefined benchmarks.

Future research directions

Based on the previous findings, further research on internships in tourism and human resource management could focus on the development and assessment of both professional and transversal competencies, particularly through structured learning agreements and reflection processes. Studies might explore the impact of clearly defined goals, formative feedback, and reflective practices on learning outcomes and professional identity. Additionally, the role of host organizations as learning environments—considering onboarding, supervision, and feedback culture—warrants closer examination. Research should also investigate how academic institutions and companies can better coordinate their shared responsibility in guiding student learning.

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