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The Role Of An Internship Programme In Strengthening Public Service Quality In A Professional Certification Body: A Single Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract

This study examines how an internship programme contributes to public service quality within the Professional Certification Institute (Lembaga Sertifikasi Profesi/LSP) at an Indonesian vocational aviation polytechnic. A qualitative single-case design was used. Data available for analysis comprised semi-structured interviews with the LSP head, an administrative staff member, and three cadets who had experienced certification services, supported by observations and institutional documents. Thematic analysis was conducted deductively through the SERVQUAL dimensions and inductively for emergent themes. Findings indicate that interns contribute most visibly to documentation, archive digitization, routine data processing, and administrative handling that informants perceived as faster. Reliability is supported by standard operating procedures but is weakened at the entry stage by inconsistent perceptions of initial briefing adequacy. Assurance is protected through strict role boundaries that reserve assessment decisions for certified assessors. The findings reflect the perceptions of five informants in one unit and are not generalizable. The central management implication is a structured internship cycle combining induction, written task guidance, supervision, periodic review, and workflow planning.

Keywords: professional certification; public service quality; internship; SERVQUAL; vocational higher education; LSP

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Introduction

Public service quality is increasingly evaluated not only by whether an institution completes an administrative task, but also by whether the service is predictable, responsive, transparent, and respectful throughout the service encounter. Contemporary higher-education research treats service quality as a multidimensional and stakeholder-dependent construct, with SERVQUAL, SERVPERF, HEdPERF, and related frameworks remaining prominent while scholars increasingly call for contextual adaptation (Toscano-Hernández et al., 2024; Goel, 2026). Recent empirical studies further show that service quality is associated with satisfaction, institutional image, loyalty, learning outcomes, and student persistence, although the relative importance of individual dimensions varies across institutional and cultural contexts (Darawong & Widayati, 2022; Hossain et al., 2025; Diao et al., 2026).

Professional certification bodies represent a distinctive service environment because the quality of the service is inseparable from the credibility of the certification decision. A certification process therefore combines administrative service, technical assessment, evidence management, communication, and impartiality. Recent evidence from a professional certification programme demonstrates that SERVQUAL can be operationalized to assess participants' perceptions of certification-service quality, indicating that certification settings can legitimately be examined through a service-quality lens (Firmansyah et al., 2022). For an LSP embedded within a vocational higher-education institution, this creates a dual institutional responsibility: the organization must protect the integrity of certification while also providing a service process that is accessible and administratively reliable.

The polytechnic studied operates in a vocational and competency-oriented environment in which certification is closely connected to occupational readiness. Its LSP functions as a certification unit serving cadets, graduates, and other eligible users within aviation-related competency schemes. The LSP operates with formal procedures, assessor authority, administrative documentation, and an internship programme in which students support selected service activities. The internship is therefore not merely a pedagogical requirement; it is also a potential organizational capacity mechanism, because interns can absorb repetitive administrative work, support documentation, and participate in controlled service interactions.

International literature suggests three developments that are particularly relevant to this case. First, higher-education service-quality research is moving toward holistic, multi-stakeholder assessment rather than treating service quality as a single undifferentiated score (Bao et al., 2024; Sahin et al., 2024). Second, student-support scholarship increasingly emphasizes access, interaction, help-seeking, and the organizational conditions under which support is delivered

(Johnson et al., 2022; Pawar & Dasgupta, 2024). Third, recent work on student voice and power distance shows that hierarchical relationships can shape whether service users feel able to communicate needs and whether institutions respond in ways that close the feedback loop (Matthews & Dollinger, 2023; Ying & Briffett-Aktaş, 2024; Ellawala et al., 2026; Tsiligiris et al., 2021). These developments are important for a cadet-oriented vocational institution, where organizational hierarchy is an explicit part of institutional life.

Two complementary theoretical lenses frame the analysis. SERVQUAL is used here as an interpretive framework distinguishing tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, rather than as a numerical gap-scoring instrument, because the available evidence is qualitative. In this case, tangibles refer to documentary and administrative service infrastructure; reliability concerns adherence to SOPs and predictable workflow; responsiveness concerns the speed of routine handling; assurance concerns competence, confidentiality, and the preservation of assessor independence; and empathy concerns how staff and interns communicate with users. This is complemented by the distinction between technical quality (what the user ultimately receives) and functional quality (how the service is delivered) (Firmansyah et al., 2022), and by good-governance principles of transparency, accountability, participation, and procedural clarity, for which research on procedural fairness offers a related perspective (Główczewski & Burdziej, 2023).

The research gap addressed here is therefore narrower than the general claim that LSP research is limited. Existing studies have examined higher-education service quality, student support, professional certification service quality, and internship learning separately, but there is considerably less empirical attention to the intersection of these domains in a vocational certification body. The present study addresses this gap by examining the LSP internship as a controlled service-capacity mechanism rather than as an independent causal variable, and asks three questions: (RQ1) how is the LSP internship programme implemented, and what contributions does it make to service quality across the SERVQUAL dimensions; (RQ2) what conditions support or constrain internship-supported service delivery; and (RQ3) what practical service-improvement strategy can be derived from the evidence? RQ1 is addressed in the first two Results subsections and Table 2, RQ2 in the briefing-gap and Discussion subsections, and RQ3 in the Practical Service-Improvement Strategy.

Research Method

A qualitative single-case study design was used to investigate the role of the LSP internship programme in strengthening public service quality in a

vocational aviation polytechnic. The case is bounded by one organizational unit, one service environment, and one internship arrangement; a case-study design is appropriate because the research question concerns organizational processes and mechanisms that are inseparable from their institutional context.

The study was conducted at the LSP of a vocational aviation polytechnic. The available interview dataset comprised one LSP head (I-LH), one administrative staff member (I-AS), and three third-year cadets who had experienced certification services (I-C1, I-C2, and I-C3), coded rather than named to strengthen confidentiality (Table 1). The original research design planned additional assessor and assessee perspectives; however, those data were not available in the dataset analyzed for this manuscript, so the findings are explicitly limited to the perspectives represented by the available informants, and the study does not claim full stakeholder triangulation.

Table 1 Informant Codes and Analytical Contribution

Code	Role	Analytical contribution
I-LH	LSP head	Institutional standards, role boundaries, internship management, service governance
I-AS	Administrative staff	Administrative workflow, documentation, workload, routine task delegation
I-C1 – I-C3	Third-year cadets	User/trainee experience, briefing adequacy, communication, perceived service strengths and gaps

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and document review. Interview questions explored service standards, internship tasks, administrative changes, communication, challenges, and improvement strategies. Observations focused on registration and documentation processes and staff–intern–user interactions. Documentary materials included SOPs, internship guidance, registration forms, administrative checklists, and activity reports.

Data analysis followed an iterative thematic procedure: familiarization and segmentation of interview material and field notes; deductive coding using the five SERVQUAL dimensions; inductive coding of themes not adequately represented by SERVQUAL; clustering of codes into broader themes compared across informant groups; and cross-checking of interpretations against observations and documents. The final synthesis distinguishes direct empirical findings from analytical interpretation.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through source comparison, method triangulation, member checking where feasible, and explicit disclosure of the incomplete stakeholder dataset. Ethical safeguards included informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymization, secure data storage, and a clear separation between research participation and academic or disciplinary assessment. Because the institutional setting is hierarchical, the study treats the

possibility of perceived power imbalance as an ethical consideration rather than assuming that voluntary consent is automatically sufficient.

Limitations. The analysis rests on five informants from one LSP, and assessor and external assessee perspectives are absent, so the findings describe perceptions within this case and do not support causal or generalizable claims. Statements about speed and responsiveness reflect what informants reported, not measured processing times. The cadet informants are described both as users of certification services and as participants in the internship; their accounts are therefore read as user/trainee perspectives and not as an independent evaluation of the LSP, and this dual position may have influenced what they chose to say. Within a hierarchical institution, the researchers' relationship to participants may also have shaped responses.

Results and Discussion

The Internship Experience: From Administrative Support to Structured Boundaries

The three informant groups occupy structurally different positions within the service system: the LSP head represents governance and institutional accountability, the administrative staff member represents the operational workflow, and the cadets represent users/trainees (their dual position is discussed under Limitations) whose experiences are shaped by both service encounters and the hierarchical vocational environment. At the experiential level, the most visible contribution of the internship programme is administrative support — the LSP head and administrative staff describe interns as useful for organizing documents, digitizing older archives, entering routine data, and preparing files, while cadets gain direct exposure to communication with assessors and service users. The experience is not uniformly positive: cadets report that the initial explanation of tasks can be too brief, producing uncertainty during the early phase of placement, particularly when technical certification terminology is unfamiliar.

The experience is structured by formal SOPs, professional role boundaries, institutional hierarchy, and workload fluctuations. Interns are positioned as supporting personnel rather than certification decision-makers, and the assessor retains authority over assessment results; periods preceding competency tests create higher document volumes and stronger demands for speed and accuracy. The essential meaning of the internship experience is therefore best described as learning-through-service under controlled professional boundaries: the programme contributes most strongly when interns perform documented, repetitive, and supervised tasks that expand administrative capacity without crossing into professional assessment authority, and becomes less effective when

induction is insufficient or peak-period workload exceeds the clarity of task allocation.

SERVQUAL-Based Thematic Findings

Table 2 SERVQUAL-Based Thematic Findings

Dimension	Empirical finding	Interpretation
Tangibles	Archive organization and digitization improved; documentary records became more orderly.	The internship strengthens the documentary infrastructure of service delivery.
Reliability	SOPs provide standardized reference points, but cadets perceive the initial briefing as insufficiently detailed.	Formal reliability exists, but operational reliability also depends on user understanding and induction.
Responsiveness	Routine data entry and document preparation can accelerate administrative handling and reduce staff bottlenecks.	Interns function as capacity buffers for repetitive workflow.
Assurance	Interns do not decide assessment results; assessors retain professional authority.	Role boundaries protect impartiality and certification credibility.
Empathy	Staff have service training; cadets gain direct experience communicating with assessors and service users.	Interpersonal competence is learned through supervised service encounters.

Table 2 shows that the internship contribution is concentrated in the administrative side of service quality rather than in the technical assessment itself. According to the informants, the strongest contribution is visible in tangibles and responsiveness, with a conditional contribution to reliability, while assurance is primarily protected by restricting intern authority rather than by delegating professional decision-making. Two inductive themes deepen this picture. The first is a briefing gap: management considers initial briefing and staff mentoring to be major enabling conditions, whereas cadet experience indicates that the briefing does not always provide enough detail for independent execution of routine tasks — indicating that 'briefing delivered' and 'briefing understood and usable' are different quality criteria. The second concerns technical-language adaptation and workload peaks: certification terminology can slow communication when interns are new to the environment, and this problem becomes more consequential near assessment periods, when document volume increases and staff have less time for repeated explanations. These patterns rest on informant accounts and should be read as perceived rather than measured contributions.

Figure 1 synthesizes the analytical architecture of the case: the internship does not operate independently of the certification system, and its effects are mediated by institutional standards, service encounters, governance principles,

and professional boundaries, so that the same internship arrangement can generate both capacity gains and adaptation problems.

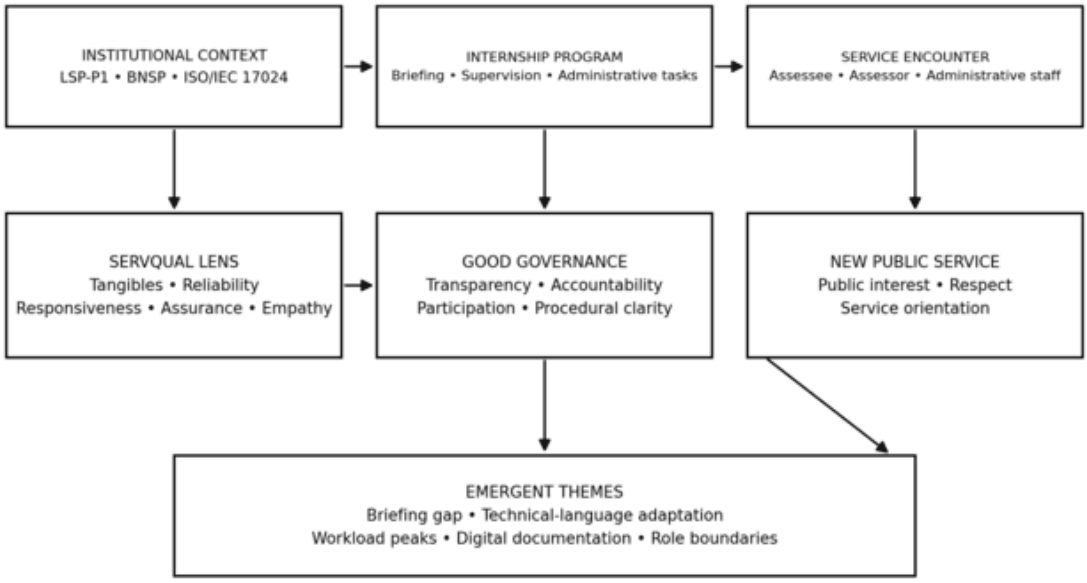


Figure 1 Integrated Conceptual Framework for Examining Internship-Supported Service Quality (Source: Authors' analysis)

Discussion: Capacity Rather Than Authority

The findings indicate that the internship programme should be understood as an organizational capacity mechanism rather than as a substitute for professional personnel: interns increase the system's capacity to handle routine administrative work, but they do not increase the organization's legitimate authority to make certification decisions. This pattern is consistent with international service-quality research showing that quality is produced by interconnected institutional processes rather than by a single frontline interaction, with holistic models emphasizing the interaction of institutional, technological, and environmental conditions in determining service quality (Bao et al., 2024; Sahin et al., 2024). In the LSP case, archive digitization and routine processing are not isolated improvements — they affect the availability of information, staff workload, perceived processing speed, and the predictability of subsequent service stages.

The reliability finding is more nuanced than a simple conclusion that the LSP has or lacks reliable procedures. The institution has SOPs, but reliability is experienced through the ability of personnel to translate those procedures into consistent action, which is where the briefing gap becomes theoretically important: a procedure that is formally available but insufficiently explained to a novice worker can produce operational uncertainty even when the

organizational rule itself is sound (Htang, 2021; Abu-Rumman & Qawasmeh, 2022; Bwachele et al., 2023). The strongest operational effect concerns responsiveness: interns can perform repetitive tasks that otherwise compete with staff time, creating a workflow-buffer effect in which permanent staff can concentrate on tasks requiring judgment, escalation, or professional interaction once routine data entry, file preparation, and archive management are delegated appropriately. This interpretation is compatible with international evidence that service-quality dimensions can vary by context — empathy has been especially salient in Indonesian samples, while reliability is more dominant elsewhere (Darawong & Widayati, 2022).

The assurance finding deserves particular emphasis because certification differs from ordinary administrative service: interns are useful precisely because their role is limited, and if interns were allowed to influence assessment decisions, the capacity gain could undermine impartiality and professional accountability. This logic is consistent with professional-certification research showing that service quality can be evaluated through structured service-quality dimensions while preserving the technical requirements of the certification programme (Firmansyah et al., 2022); service improvement should therefore never be defined solely as faster processing, since a faster process that weakens impartiality would represent deterioration in assurance even if users report shorter waiting times.

Empathy and Voice in Relation to the Literature

The empathy dimension reveals the strongest connection between service quality and learning. Cadets experience the service system from a new position — no longer only certification participants but also contributors to the service process — and direct interaction with assessors and service users exposes them to communication requirements that are difficult to learn through classroom instruction alone. This resonates with international work showing that student voice is effective when institutions are receptive and responsive, not merely when they create formal opportunities for feedback (Matthews & Dollinger, 2023; Conner et al., 2025), while the hierarchical vocational setting suggests that power distance may shape how openly cadets voice difficulties, although the present data do not allow this to be tested directly (Ellawala et al., 2026; Tsiligiris et al., 2021). The divergence between the LSP head's assessment of briefing adequacy and the cadets' experience should not be reduced to an individual training problem; it is an organizational design issue that calls for a documented minimum competency threshold — covering workflow knowledge, terminology, confidentiality requirements, escalation routes, and quality checks — before an intern is assigned a task independently (Johnson et al., 2022; Pawar & Dasgupta, 2024).

The case corresponds with broader trends in service-quality research: service quality in higher education is context-dependent and increasingly assessed through holistic frameworks (Toscano-Hernández et al., 2024; Kataria & Rajput, 2026), the relative weight of dimensions such as reliability and empathy differs across national contexts (Darawong & Widayati, 2022; Diao et al., 2026), and student support, procedural fairness, and voice influence legitimacy and participation (Johnson et al., 2022; Pawar & Dasgupta, 2024; Główczewski & Burdziej, 2023; Matthews & Dollinger, 2023; Tsiligiris et al., 2021). For the LSP studied, the implication is to combine service dimensions with workflow, governance, and role-boundary evidence rather than relying on SERVQUAL alone, to make escalation routes and task ownership explicit, and to provide transparent explanations and feedback loops while maintaining legitimate hierarchy.

Practical Service-Improvement Strategy

Based on the evidence, five operational interventions are recommended: (1) a structured induction module covering the service pathway, task boundaries, technical terminology, confidentiality, escalation, and quality checks; (2) a written task guide with step-by-step procedures and examples of acceptable outputs; (3) staged authorization, in which interns observe first, perform under supervision second, and work independently on bounded routine tasks only after competency confirmation; (4) short periodic reviews during peak certification periods to identify bottlenecks before they become service failures; and (5) simple workflow monitoring for document status, ownership, pending actions, and closure. These interventions are proposals derived from a single case and have not been tested.

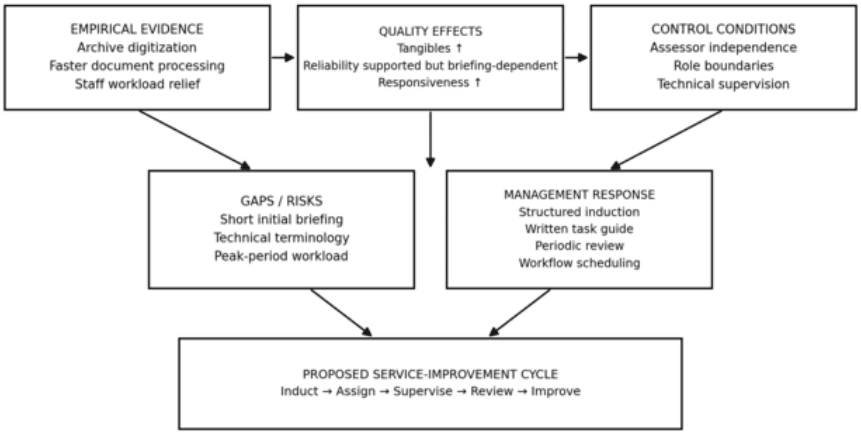


Figure 2 Evidence-to-Strategy Pathway for Strengthening Internship-Supported Service Delivery (Source: Authors' analysis)

Figure 2 translates the empirical findings into an operational improvement cycle — induct, assign, supervise, review, improve — without claiming causal effect sizes. These measures are preferable to simply increasing intern numbers,

since additional interns without workflow design may reproduce ambiguity at greater scale; the objective should instead be end-to-end service reliability, consistent with the broader international movement toward holistic service-quality management and student-centred institutional support (Bao et al., 2024; Sahin et al., 2024; Kataria & Rajput, 2025).

Conclusion

The case demonstrates that an internship programme can strengthen service quality in a professional certification body when intern participation is deliberately designed as bounded administrative capacity: the clearest contributions occur in documentation, archive organization, routine processing, and responsiveness; reliability is supported by formal SOPs but depends on whether interns can translate those procedures into practice; assurance is protected through explicit role boundaries that reserve certification decisions for authorized assessors; and empathy emerges through direct, supervised interaction with service users and professional staff. The most important organizational finding is the briefing gap between managerial assumptions and trainee experience, which shows that service quality cannot be assessed solely from the existence of procedures or training activities but must also be examined from the perspective of the person performing the task — consistent with international evidence emphasizing contextual, multi-stakeholder assessment and student-support access, responsiveness, voice, and relational conditions (Toscano-Hernández et al., 2024; Goel, 2026; Johnson et al., 2022; Ellawala et al., 2026). Accordingly, the recommended institutional model is an induction–assignment–supervision–review–improvement cycle, implemented without transferring professional assessment authority to interns. The conclusion is deliberately bounded by the available dataset: it does not include assessor and external assessee interviews, does not contain numerical SERVQUAL measurements, and concerns one vocational certification unit, so transferability depends on contextual similarity; future research should extend the stakeholder sample, compare multiple certification cycles, and, where data permit, combine qualitative evidence with service-time and error-rate indicators to test whether the proposed workflow changes produce measurable improvements.

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AI Declaration

The author acknowledges the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in supporting the preparation of this manuscript. The author remains fully responsible for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the research and its findings.

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