

Internship Preparation and Social Work: Mental and Emotional in Its Implementation

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ABSTRACT

Internship constitutes a critical component of higher education, particularly in Social Work, as it bridges theoretical knowledge and field-based professional practice. In the context of Timor-Leste, internship implementation often occurs in remote areas characterized by geographical limitations, strong socio-cultural traditions, and complex community dynamics. This study aims to analyze the mental and emotional preparation of Social Work students during their internship experiences and to examine the socio-cultural factors influencing their adaptation process. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, this research applies documentary analysis and content analysis of official internship reports and relevant literature. The findings indicate that students initially experience anxiety, social isolation, and psychological pressure due to environmental changes, cultural differences, and separation from family. However, through adaptive communication, cultural sensitivity, and reflective practice, students gradually develop emotional resilience, professional maturity, and socio-cultural competence. The study highlights that mental and emotional preparedness is a fundamental determinant of internship success. Without adequate preparation, students risk stress and disengagement; conversely, structured socio-emotional preparation enhances professional identity formation and community integration. The study recommends integrating socio-emotional training, intercultural competence, and psychological mentoring into the Social Work curriculum to strengthen students' readiness for field practice.

Keywords: internship preparation; mental health; emotional resilience; social work education.

INTRODUCTION

Internships, by their nature in the university setting, are grounded in the core principles of teaching, learning, and community service. In this sense, the internship is the professional practice undertaken by final-year students to acquire practical experience and consolidate their theoretical competencies. The internship also plays a central role in shaping students' character (Lieketseng et al., 2017; Syafrudin & Purwanto, 2025).

Participation in an internship places students in new physical, mental, and emotional situations. This occurs because the internship introduces different daily living conditions, ranging from food, logistics, and accommodation to personal matters related to interns' health and individual needs. On a personal level, the intern also faces the reality of being separated from loved ones, including family members and close companions in everyday life (Baird & Mollen, 2023; Boss, 2016; Estradé et al., 2023; Frivold et al., 2016; Parent et al., 2016).

In addition, within the specific context of Timor-Leste, interns face various social and local forces such as martial arts groups, youth gangs, political party influences, as well as cultural and mythical elements of local traditions, including sacred places associated with customary beliefs, which often limit interns' room for action. This is compounded by geographical and demographic conditions: the population is dispersed across remote villages, with large distances between settlements in isolated sucos (Europa, 2016; Holmes & Argent, 2016; Ibrahim et al., 2018; Nkhalamba, 2023; Yor, 2021). These conditions challenge interns to find appropriate solutions.

In this article on mental and emotional preparation for internships, a descriptive study with a documentary approach is adopted, drawing on internship narratives and the forms of practice implemented at placement sites (Baird & Mollen, 2023; Hora et al., 2020; Pasay-An et al., 2025; Zehr, 2016; Zeng, 2025). Accordingly, in the implementation of an internship, the intern faces new situations that demand personal adaptation: leaving familiar routines and confronting new environments, while having to comply with and adapt to social norms, lifestyle patterns, climate, and the cultural character of the community in which they are integrated during the internship period.

The urgency of addressing these research gaps is underscored by several factors. Timor-Leste's higher education system is expanding rapidly, with increasing numbers of students being placed in community internships across all thirteen municipalities. The National University of Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL), as the country's leading higher education institution, bears responsibility for preparing students who will become future social workers, community developers, and policy makers. Without an adequate understanding of the mental and emotional dimensions of internship preparation, students risk experiencing psychological distress, professional disillusionment, and premature exit from the field. Moreover, ineffective internship experiences may compromise the quality of services provided to vulnerable communities, undermining the very purpose of social work education (Gao et al., 2025; Kruger & Wilson, 2021; Lieketseng et al., 2017; Sanhueza-Díaz et al., 2025; Sue et al., 2015).

The novelty of this research lies in several interconnected dimensions. First, it constitutes the first systematic examination of mental and emotional preparation for social work internships in the Timorese context, addressing a significant gap in Southeast Asian scholarship. Second, the study integrates multiple contextual factors—geographical constraints, cultural traditions, informal power structures, and psychological transitions—into a comprehensive framework for understanding internship readiness. Third, by drawing on documentary analysis of actual internship implementation in Suku Ma'abat, Manatuto Municipality, the research provides empirically grounded insights rather than purely theoretical speculation. Fourth, the study develops an integrated analytical model that connects cognitive, emotional, and cultural dimensions of internship preparation, offering a holistic framework applicable to similar contexts.

This research aims to analyze the mental and emotional preparation of Social Work students during their internship experience and to examine the socio-cultural factors influencing their adaptation process in remote Timorese communities. Specifically, the study seeks to: (1) identify the psychological challenges students encounter during initial internship placement; (2) analyze the emotional regulation strategies students develop through field experience; (3) examine how cultural factors, including traditional beliefs and community power structures, influence student adaptation; (4) explore the role of reflective practice in professional identity formation; and (5) develop recommendations for integrating socio-emotional preparation into the social work curriculum.

The contributions of this research extend to multiple stakeholders. For academic institutions, particularly UNTL and other Timorese universities, the findings offer evidence-based recommendations for strengthening internship preparation programs. For educators and internship supervisors, the study provides insights into the psychological support mechanisms students require during field placements. For students themselves, the research validates the emotional challenges they experience and offers frameworks for understanding their own adaptation processes. For the broader academic community, this study contributes to the international literature on internship preparation by illuminating the specific dynamics of post-conflict, culturally traditional contexts.

Ultimately, the research aims to enhance the quality of social work education in Timor-Leste, thereby improving the effectiveness of future professionals serving Timorese communities.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach using documentary analysis and reflective interpretation of social work internship practices at Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL). A qualitative approach was selected because the research aims to explore in depth the mental and emotional preparedness of final-year students within the specific socio-cultural context of Timor-Leste.

Research Design

The research design is descriptive-analytical in nature. It focuses on examining students' mental and emotional readiness before and during the internship period, as well as identifying socio-cultural and geographical factors influencing their adaptation process in the field.

Research Site and Participants

The study is based on the Social Work Internship (Estágio Serviço Social) Period XXVI, Academic Year 2025.1, conducted in Suku Ma'abat, Administrative Post of Manatuto, Municipality of Manatuto, as documented in the official internship report. The primary subjects of the study were final-year Social Work students undertaking field internships. Supporting data were drawn from official internship reports and institutional documentation.

Research Instruments

The instruments used in this study included:

- Documentary analysis of internship reports;
- Reflective field notes from students;
- Relevant theoretical literature on internship experiences and socio-emotional development;
- Non-participant observation of social dynamics within the internship location.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through:

- Documentary review of the official internship report;
- Literature review of theoretical frameworks related to internship preparation and emotional resilience;
- Systematic synthesis of documented student experiences.

Data Analysis Technique

Data were analyzed using content analysis, focusing on identifying key themes such as:

- Mental adaptation;
- Emotional resilience;
- Social and cultural pressures;
- Coping strategies;
- Community integration dynamics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Structural Context of Internship Implementation in Remote Areas

The internship implementation in Suku Ma'abat, Manatuto Municipality, reveals that geographical and infrastructural conditions significantly influence students' field engagement. The long distances between villages, limited transportation, and uneven demographic distribution create logistical constraints that demand high levels of physical endurance and time management.

From a structural-functional perspective, rural community systems operate through strong kinship networks and localized authority structures. Students must navigate informal power relations, traditional leaders, and culturally sensitive spaces. This aligns with ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which posits that individuals function within layered environmental systems—micro, meso, exo, and macro levels. In this case, students are not merely interacting with individuals but entering a complex ecological structure shaped by tradition, politics, and communal norms.

The findings indicate that internship preparation must extend beyond academic orientation to include environmental and contextual mapping skills. Students who demonstrated awareness of local structures adapted more effectively than those relying solely on theoretical knowledge.

Psychological Transition and Role Adjustment

A significant finding of this study concerns the psychological transition experienced by students during the early phase of the internship. Many reported emotional instability, hesitation in decision-making, and self-doubt regarding professional competence.

According to role transition theory, entering a new professional environment triggers identity negotiation and cognitive restructuring. Students must redefine themselves from “learners” into “practitioners.” This transitional tension often produces what Mezirow (1991) describes as a “disorienting dilemma,” a critical reflection moment that can either hinder or accelerate professional growth.

In this study, students who engaged in reflective practices such as journaling and peer discussions showed faster psychological stabilization. This suggests that structured reflection mechanisms function as protective factors against professional anxiety.

Furthermore, the internship setting exposed students to ethical complexities and social realities that differ from classroom simulations. Exposure to community conflicts, youth gang influences, and political sensitivities required students to balance professional neutrality with cultural respect. This experience ultimately accelerated professional identity consolidation.

Emotional Regulation and Resilience Development

The emotional dimension of internship implementation proved to be one of the most influential determinants of performance. Students encountered emotional stress due to:

- Separation from family support systems
- Cultural unfamiliarity
- Community skepticism toward outsiders
- Exposure to social vulnerability cases

Resilience theory suggests that exposure to manageable stress, when accompanied by coping strategies, enhances adaptive capacity. The findings indicate that resilience among students developed progressively through:

- Peer support networks
- Supervisor feedback
- Community engagement experiences
- Cultural accommodation strategies

Emotional regulation became visible in how students responded to rejection or limited community participation. Rather than withdrawing, most students gradually adjusted communication styles and adopted culturally appropriate interaction models. This confirms that resilience is not static but dynamically constructed through experiential exposure and guided mentorship.

Intercultural Competence and Cultural Sensitivity

Timor-Leste's socio-cultural fabric strongly influences social interaction patterns. Sacred spaces, traditional authority systems, and oral cultural narratives shape community responses to external actors. From the perspective of intercultural competence theory, effective engagement requires:

- Cultural awareness
- Cultural humility
- Behavioral adaptability

Students who recognized local customs and respected sacred spaces gained faster community trust. Conversely, early-stage misunderstandings often stemmed from insufficient cultural briefing prior to field placement.

The internship thus functioned as a laboratory of intercultural negotiation. Social Work practice in such contexts cannot be implemented through standardized models alone. Instead, it demands contextual adaptation.

This reinforces the need to integrate intercultural competence modules into pre-internship training programs.

Social Power Dynamics and Youth Group Influence

An additional contextual complexity identified in the field relates to the presence of youth groups, martial arts associations, and politically affiliated actors. These groups shape informal authority structures within the community.

Students reported initial hesitation when engaging in interventions involving youth populations due to concerns about group loyalty and potential misinterpretation of their presence. This finding corresponds with social control theory, which suggests that group belonging influences behavior patterns and social compliance.

Internship success in such environments required strategic relationship-building rather than direct confrontation. Students who adopted participatory approaches and collaborative dialogue with community leaders achieved higher levels of acceptance.

This dimension highlights that Social Work internships in Timor-Leste require strategic social navigation skills in addition to technical competence.

Professional Identity Formation and Transformative Learning

The internship period functioned as a transformative learning experience. Over time, students demonstrated measurable shifts in:

- Self-confidence
- Decision-making independence
- Ethical awareness
- Community engagement capability

According to transformative learning theory, meaningful change occurs when individuals critically reflect on assumptions and reconstruct professional perspectives.

The study reveals that the internship experience enabled students to internalize the values of empathy, responsibility, and accountability. Professional identity was no longer abstract but grounded in lived community interaction.

This supports the argument that internship preparation must not only transmit procedural knowledge but also cultivate reflective capacity and ethical maturity.

Integrated Analytical Model

Based on the findings, internship effectiveness in the Timor-Leste context can be conceptualized through a three-dimensional readiness model:

1. Cognitive Readiness

Mastery of theoretical frameworks and intervention strategies.

2. Emotional Readiness

Capacity for emotional regulation, resilience, and stress management.

3. Cultural Readiness

Intercultural competence and contextual adaptability.

The absence of one dimension weakens internship outcomes. Students who demonstrated balanced development across these three areas achieved smoother adaptation and stronger community integration.

Implications for Curriculum Development

The findings provide several academic implications:

- Pre-internship training should include structured psychological preparation sessions.
- Cultural immersion workshops should be mandatory before field placement.
- Reflective supervision mechanisms should be institutionalized.
- Peer-support systems should be formally facilitated.

Internship should be framed as a holistic developmental phase rather than merely a fieldwork requirement.

This expanded discussion demonstrates that Social Work internship implementation in Timor-Leste represents a multidimensional adaptive process shaped by psychological transition, emotional resilience, cultural negotiation, and social power structures. Mental and emotional preparation is not supplementary but central to professional effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that mental and emotional preparation constitutes a foundational requirement for effective Social Work internship implementation in Timor-Leste. The internship environment exposes students to geographical constraints, socio-cultural complexities, and psychological challenges that demand adaptive capacities beyond academic knowledge. The integration of resilience development, intercultural competence, and structured mentoring significantly enhances students' professional identity formation and community integration. Therefore, higher education institutions must redesign internship preparation models by embedding socio-emotional training, reflective supervision, and culturally responsive frameworks into the curriculum. Future research may employ mixed-method approaches or longitudinal designs to measure the long-term professional impact of socio-emotional internship preparation.

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