Tensions in internship assessment practices: Compliance, meaningfulness and improving learning

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Internship assessments in China's tertiary VET are expected to be summative (judging job performance and verifying compliance) and formative (providing feedback for improvement). However, given the weak college–workplace connection and disregard for making learning plans, establishing assessment protocols, and providing constructive feedback, compliance-oriented assessment tends to predominate. This study examined the perspectives of instructors/supervisors (n = 17) and students (n = 20) in China's tertiary VET institutions regarding the procedures and purposes of internship assessment across college and workplace contexts. Inductive content analysis revealed that college-based assessments of internships largely assigned inflated grades and ignored specific feedback and formative monitoring of learning. Workplace assessments, meanwhile, primarily consisted of brief one-off procedures intended to determine intern employability. These findings suggest an overemphasis on compliance checks, a disregard for meaningful and precise summative judgments of performance, and a lack of consideration for formative improvement of learning in China's tertiary VET internships.

Keywords: China, vocational education and training (VET), internship, assessment, workplace

Recent national reform initiatives in China have emphasized the need for both formative and summative assessments (Chinese Ministry of Education [CMoE], 2019). Formative and summative assessment functions are concerned with when the information is used (Scriven, 1967), who uses the information (Bloom et al., 1971; Wiliam, 2006), and how the information appears (Sadler, 1989). Timing refers to either prior to the end of teaching while change is possible (i.e., formative) or at the end of teaching when a quality judgment has to be made (i.e., summative). Although teachers and instructors should use assessment to determine who needs to be taught what next (Brown & Hattie, 2012), they are also expected to make summative decisions (e.g., Pass/Fail and grades awarded) about students. Likewise, students and learners are expected to use assessment tasks to guide their study, attention, and effort, but understand that the quality of their work will be summatively evaluated. Thus, internship assessments in vocational education and training (VET) ought to provide insights into how learning and/or teaching can be improved (i.e., formative), yet they are used predominantly to make overall judgments of quality and comply with administrative regulations (i.e., summative).

Furthermore, the content of assessment changes depending on whether it occurs in college versus workplace settings. In the former, it focuses on knowledge, while in the latter it ought to focus on skills to implement knowledge in practice. Prior studies have found that tertiary VET has neglected the establishment of clear learning plans in internships (Wu, 2021; Xue & Li, 2022) and has often ignored the provision of constructive feedback in college settings (Cai, 2014). Overall, little is known about how formative and summative assessments are enacted across college and workplace contexts in Chinese tertiary VET. This study contributes to the field by conducting interviews with workplace supervisors and college instructors, and focus groups with student interns, shedding light on the enacted practicalities of internship assessment across college-based and workplace environments in Chinese

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tertiary VET. Unfortunately, the results suggest a failure to meet formative expectations, as outlined in current national policies, and failure to achieve meaningful, accurate summative assessments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defensible assessment protocols in higher education require that the assessment system demonstrates reliable, consistent scoring of tasks that validly measure the important learning outcomes of the system (Brown, 2024). To ensure validity of internship learning, assessments need to ensure students know key knowledge of the theories and principles of the practices they are preparing for. Further, insofar as actual practical application of knowledge is concerned, assessments need to ensure that sufficient samples of practice are observed under a variety of circumstances. However, to ensure the assessment system is educational, not just evaluative, the assessment needs to challenge students so that they may make mistakes and have the space to learn from such failure. Thus, a good internship assessment system has to give students many opportunities to demonstrate knowledge and skill in the valued outcomes of their discipline, with space to improve before re-assessment, ensuring that whatever scoring and feedback exists is both informative and truthful (Lefroy et al., 2015).

However, a number of factors impact on workplace assessment. Trainers assigned to evaluate workplace work need to understand that assessment should be both formative and summative, have enough time to conduct valid assessments of their interns, and know how to evaluate their interns (Massie & Ali, 2016). Even the background experience and expertise of the trainer matters (Govaerts et al., 2011). A further complication is whether interns perceive 'formative' feedback as being actually helpful, rather than simply summative (Watling & Ginsburg, 2019). The problems faced by medical education in terms of workplace assessment are not unique to doctors; the same issues exist in apprenticeship and trainee education systems (Strickland et al., 2001). Strickland et al. (2001, pp. 203-205) identify a number of factors that inhibit quality assessment in workplaces including:

> Assessment strategies that use only summative assessment and provide little or no feedback, interns being confined to routine tasks with little variation in work routine and no opportunities to experience new tasks, programs driven by schedules of the training provider and where assessment is available only at set times, infrequent or non-existent communication and reporting processes, workplace supervisors who have little motivation or interest in apprentices' or trainees' learning; trainers and teachers who are out of touch with the realities of the workplace, and employers viewing interns as 'subsidized labor'.

Hence, the challenges of creating high-quality workplace assessment seem to be quite different to ensuring reliable scoring and validity in knowledge-focused assessment in college-based aspects of VET. The question remains whether these challenges apply equally in China's tertiary VET assessment systems.

Assessment in China's Tertiary VET

Internship assessment in the VET sector in China is guided by national policies (CMoE, 2019, 2020; Chinese State Council, 2022). The policies require that summative grades or judgments consider the validity, authenticity, and reliability of assessment design and implementation (Brentnall et al., 2023; O'Neill, 2024; Smith, 2014) and conformity with the code of conduct (McKenzie et al., 2025). The policies also expect assessment tasks to provide learners with information on how they might improve their performance (Peach et al., 2014; Richardson et al., 2013; Sadler, 1989). Workplace internships have been strengthened with the policy to include a minimum of 6 months' placement at an industrial

worksite (CMoE, 2019). However, weak policy enforcement has limited the effectiveness of these reform initiatives.

The college–workplace partnerships are relatively superficial. Workplace organizations often do not appoint staff to monitor interns, nor do they have substantial cooperation with college-based instructors (Wu, 2021; Xue & Li, 2022). According to Jin et al. (2020) and Wu (2021), well-defined learning plans and related assessment protocols have been consistently absent from internship programs in China's tertiary sector. Consequently, many tertiary VET institutions struggle to secure sufficient internship opportunities, let alone make meaningful and accurate judgments of performance and arrange formative assessment activities for internships (Wu, 2021).

This means that China's VET interns tend to be graded by college instructors rather than by workplace instructors, despite the latter having direct and constant contact with interns at the placement site (Jin et al., 2020; Xue & Li, 2022). As Jin et al. (2020) found, college instructors in China rarely interact with students during internships. They have only brief workplace visits and are therefore unlikely to observe a representative and valid sample of job performance, undermining the validity of their judgments (McNamara, 2013). This creates an assessment experience that fails to meet both national policies and international standards for effective educational assessment.

Unfortunately, the problem of unreliable and inadequate assessment in China's tertiary VET is not limited to that context. The quality of assessment practices in VET internships is also compromised by employers' reluctance to take responsibility for developing students' job-related competencies, driven by economic efficiency considerations (Rainbird, 2000; Wu, 2021). Workplace instructors may lack detailed assessment guidelines and criteria, as well as training in assessment, resulting in compromised validity and reliability of grading practices (Peach et al., 2014; Richardson et al., 2013). Generic and non-transparent grading practices are common in internship assessments and hinder student learning (McKenzie et al., 2025; Milne & Caldicott, 2016). Inflated grading can be prevalent due to leniency or insufficient training in evaluation skills (Bennett-Wimbush & Amstutz, 2011). These poorly planned and imprecise practices have undermined the reliability and validity of workplace internship assessment (McKenzie et al., 2025; Smith, 2014).

Students themselves may perceive internship assessment tasks as "box-ticking exercises" because of limited guidance from formative assessments; some students rely on memory to complete assessment forms retrospectively rather than during training events (Massie & Ali, 2016). Students also perceive workplace supervisors' verbal feedback as low-quality and note that there is limited time to conduct workplace assessments and obtain feedback (Massie & Ali, 2016). Although reflective tasks are meant to support self-regulated learning, some students find them to be time-consuming and repetitive, as if they were formalities rather than tools for improving learning (O'Mahony et al., 2024). Separation of reflections from internship experiences also makes reflective journals less effective (Brodie & Irving, 2007; Boud & Middleton, 2003). Hence, there are challenges in workplace assessment from both the students' and the instructors'/supervisors' perspectives.

Ideally, as Ajjawi et al. (2020) have argued, because workplace supervisors have more direct and ongoing observations of student practices than college instructors do, they should assume primary responsibility for assessment design and grading. In the Netherlands, workplace instructors typically make sound judgments through continuous observation of student performance and by using reference frames from professional communities, educational institutions, and peers (De Vos et al., 2022).

Ensuring assessment quality in China's VET is complicated by the prominence of high-stakes examinations (Kennedy et al., 2011) and the difficulties instructors/supervisors face in making meaningful and accurate judgments (De Vos et al., 2022) and in using assessment formatively (Yan & Brown, 2021). The pedagogical approach of work-integrated learning (WIL), which seeks to intentionally integrate authentic work-focused experiences into the college curriculum (Zegwaard et al., 2023), provides a useful framework for examining and potentially improving internship assessment practices in China's VET sector. Although internships in China's VET share similarities with WIL by offering workplace placements, the current findings reveal limited integration between educational institutions and workplace partners. In particular, superficial partnerships between colleges and workplace organizations, as well as the lack of structured assessment design, undermine the effectiveness of internships as a meaningful learning component within the curriculum. The study addresses two research questions:

> RQ1. *What assessment procedures and purposes do stakeholders attribute to the college-based assessment and workplace assessment of student interns?*
>
> RQ2. *How do colleges and workplaces collaborate in implementing and completing the assessment of student interns?*

METHODS

This study used non-experimental semi-structured interviews and focus groups with qualitative data analysis. Data were collected with ethical approval from the authors' institution (UAHPEC Ref. No. 26747). Participation was voluntary; all participants had the right to withdraw without having to give a reason, and the identities and contributions of individuals were fully anonymized. All participants received a Participant Information Sheet that outlined their rights and protections. They all signed a Consent Form agreeing to the terms. Participant names only appeared on the Consent Form and were coded with a participant identification number. A separate list of named participants was maintained to link them to the audio recordings, transcripts, reports, and manuscripts via a master identification file stored in a password-protected folder to protect participant confidentiality.

All data collection took place either in person or online, with interview durations averaging 35 minutes and focus group durations of 1 hour.

Institutional Context and Participants

Tertiary VET institutions in China normally include the following four categories (Min & Zhu, 2020):

- Higher vocational colleges that provide two- or three-year diploma courses;
- Some subordinate faculties of regular universities that provide two- or three-year diploma courses;
- Technical colleges that provide two- or three-year certificate courses for technical qualifications; and
- Adult tertiary institutions that provide full-time and part-time certificate courses.

On a convenience basis, participants were recruited from four disciplines: computer sciences (CS), mechanical engineering (ME), health sciences (HS), and food sciences (FS) at a tertiary VET institution in China. Individual interviews were conducted with eight instructors from higher vocational colleges and with nine workplace supervisors from external organizations that provided internship

opportunities for students from higher vocational colleges or technical colleges. Four focus groups of four to six student interns from higher vocational colleges were conducted, involving a total of 20 participants. The college instructors (Table 1) were from six colleges in Guangdong province, four of which were public institutions. All but two of the college instructors had previous employment in their industry, and teaching experience ranged from two to 23 years (M = 11.13; SD = 7.08). However, the instructors had much less experience in industrial employment (M = 2.19 years; SD = 2.30). Academic ranks ranged from Assistant Lecturer to Associate Professor, with five holding the position of Lecturer.

TABLE 1: College instructor participant information

ID	Gender	Subject Area	Institute	Institute Ownership	Professional Title	Teaching (Years)	Work in Industry (Years)	Interns per Cohort Taught
T1	M	CS	College E	Public	Associate Professor	23	0	15
T2	F	CS	College D	Private	Associate Professor	10	5	5
T3	F	ME	College C	Public	Lecturer	8	6	25
T4	M	ME	College B	Public	Lecturer	20	0	15
T5	F	HS	College A	Private	Lecturer	8	2	20
T6	F	HS	College A	Private	Assistant Lecturer	2	0.5	20
T7	M	FS	College A	Private	Lecturer	6	3	20
T8	M	FS	College F	Public	Lecturer	12	1	20

Note: CS for computer sciences; ME for mechanical engineering; HS for health sciences; FS for food sciences.

The nine workplace instructors (Table 2) worked at eight different companies, two of which were small, four medium, and two large. Mean length of employment in industry was 9.89 years (SD = 2.93). Four supervisors indicated they supervised one to two interns per cohort, with the balance having three to ten. Only two of the supervisors were women.

TABLE 2: Workplace supervisor participant information.

ID	Gender	Subject Area	Employer	Employer Size	Job Title	Work in Industry (Years)	Interns per Cohort Supervised
W1	M	CS	Company D	Small	Senior	5	1
W2	M	CS	Company E	Medium	Intermediate	8	3 to 4
W3	M	CS	Company F	Small	Senior	8	1 to 2
W4	M	ME	Company C	Medium	Senior	15	5 to 10
W5	M	ME	Company B	Medium	Intermediate	8	3 to 8
W6	F	HS	Hospital A	Large	Junior	12	1 to 2
W7	M	HS	Hospital A	Large	Intermediate	11	1 to 2
W8	F	FS	Company G	Large	Intermediate	11	varies
W9	M	FS	Company H	Medium	Senior	11	3 to 4

Note: CS for computer sciences; ME for mechanical engineering; HS for health sciences; FS for food sciences; employer size refers to the number of employees: small (0 to 99); medium (100 to 499); large (over 500)

The student-participants were from five different colleges of the four subject areas (Table 3). Eleven of the student participants were mentored by three of the college instructor participants. In general, while students in the health sciences interned for 10 months on average (*SD* = .63), students from the other three disciplines interned for just 4.64 months on average (*SD* = 2.62). Two computer science students did not work in relevant industries for their subjects, while the other students interned in such industries.

TABLE 3: Student focus group participant information.

ID	Gender	Subject Area	Institute	Duration (Months)	Type of Interned Jobs	Employer Size	Graduation Year
S1	M	CS	College I	2 + 5	Video-editor	Small	2022
S1	F	CS	College I	2 + 4	E-commerce operator	Small	2022
S1	F	CS	College I	12	HR clerk	Small	2022
S1	F	CS	College I	3	Programming teachers for teens	Small	2022
S1	F	CS	College I	3	Admin officer	Small	2023
S2	M	ME	College B	2	After-sales service technician	Small	2023
S2	M	ME	College B	3	After-sales service technician	Small	2023
S2	M	ME	College B	3	Production technician	Small	2023
S2	M	ME	College B	3	After-sales service technician	Small	2023
S2	M	ME	College B	4	After-sales service technician	Small	2023
S3	M	HS	College A	10	Rotational nurse	Large	2023
S3	M	HS	College A	10	Rotational nurse	Large	2023
S3	M	HS	College G	9	Rotational nurse	Large	2023
S3	F	HS	College B	11	Rotational nurse	Large	2023
S3	F	HS	College H	10	Rotational midwife	Large	2023
S3	M	HS	College H	10	Rotational nurse	Large	2023
S4	M	FS	College A	4	Food safety inspector	Large	2023
S4	F	FS	College A	6	Food safety inspector	Large	2023
S4	F	FS	College A	3	Food safety inspector	Medium	2023
S4	M	FS	College A	6	Food safety inspector	Large	2023

Note: CS = computer sciences; ME =mechanical engineering; HS =health sciences; FS =food sciences; employer size refers to the number of employees: small (0 to 99); medium (100 to 499); large (over 500)

Interview and Focus Group Protocols

The primary focus of the interviews and focus groups was to elicit participants' understanding of the purposes and methods of college-based and workplace assessments (Table 4). Topics ranged from purposes and methods of information collection to methods of making grading or selection judgments, and finally to giving and receiving feedback.

TABLE 4: Interview questions and focus group prompts

College Instructors	Workplace Supervisors	Students
• How do you assess students? • What criteria do you use to grade? • How do you judge intern performance? • What do you value when making a judgment? • What grades do you assign? • What kinds of students get high grades? What kinds of students get low grades? • What feedback do you provide to interns on reflective journals or summary reports? • How often do you communicate with workplace supervisors regarding interns' performance?	• How do you learn about intern performance? • What do you look at when judging intern performance? • How do you make the judgments? • Who is involved in the judgment-making? • What feedback do you provide on the internship evaluation form? • What written or oral feedback do you provide to interns after the evaluations? What is it for? • How often do you talk to college instructors regarding interns' performance?	• What do you write in reflective journals and summary reports? • How helpful are reflective journals and summary reports to you? • How important is the result to you? • What feedback do you receive on reflective journals and summary reports? • What grades do you receive? • What summative feedback do you receive from the workplace supervisors on the evaluation forms? • How are you evaluated in the workplace? • What feedback do you receive from workplace supervisors at the evaluations?

Data Analysis

Transcription and translation

The interviews and focus groups were conducted in Mandarin and audio-recorded with participants' permission. The audio recordings were transcribed and translated into English using ChatGPT-4, with moderation by the lead author. To protect confidentiality, participant names and institution affiliations were omitted when translating the transcripts in ChatGPT. Therefore, no identifiable information was entered into the ChatGPT platform. A bilingual speaker proficient in both English and Mandarin confirmed the functional equivalence (i.e., consistency in meaning; Jin & Nida, 2006) between the English and Mandarin transcripts of interviews and focus groups.

Analytic categories

The interview and focus group data were coded using inductive analysis (Thomas, 2006). Categories were identified based on frequent, dominant, or meaningful patterns in the raw data. Separate categories and subcategories were developed for college-based and workplace assessments. Data were aggregated from supervisors, instructors, and students, resulting in a total of 15 categories covering college-based settings and workplace settings. An independent coder reviewed 30% of the texts with a robust chance-adjusted kappa coefficient of agreement ($\kappa = .84$).

RESULTS

The 15 categories were aggregated into five major categories: two for college-based contexts and three for workplace settings (see Tables 5 and 6).

College-Based Assessments of Internships

Table 5 below shows the categories, sub-categories, and definitions of college-based assessments of internships.

TABLE 5: College-based assessments of internships.

Category	Sub-Category	Definition
Observing Formalities (*n* = 183)	1. Symbolic and Generic Feedback (*n* = 56)	Educational and workplace organizations tended to provide overly positive and overly general comments in reflective journals or on evaluation forms.
	2. Inflated and Ignored Grades (*n* = 54)	While inflated grading was practiced across educational and workplace organizations, students generally paid little attention to it.
	3. Focus on Discipline (*n* = 26)	The college instructor largely graded students based on how closely they followed institutional rules and teacher directives.
	4. Box-Ticking Exercises (*n* = 16)	Most students treated reflective journals as a formality, focusing primarily on meeting graduation requirements.
	5. Infrequent Progress Supervision from Colleges (*n* = 12)	During the internship period, educational institutions seldom conducted visits or maintained regular communication with students.
Improving Learning (*n* = 13)	6. Need for Specific and Truthful Feedback (*n* = 8)	Educational and workplace organizations rarely left specific feedback on reflective journals or evaluation forms.
	7. Minimal Use of Self-Reflection Data (*n* = 5)	College instructors or students rarely acknowledged the reflective purposes of journals.

In the example quotations presented below each category description, each quote is identified by the contributor's participant ID and the quote serial number.

Symbolic and generic feedback

Most workplace supervisors considered delivering written feedback on evaluation forms to be just adhering to the procedures. The comments they provided to interns were mostly symbolic, neither honest nor specific. One workplace supervisor said: "As for comments, I think in this kind of environment [where] we cooperate with them; it is basically template-based cooperation." (W1:009), and from another: "For ordinary students, we may not even write anything and just stamp the seal." (W4:073).

Likewise, college instructors described the feedback provided by workplace organizations on the evaluation form as overly general and consistently positive. As one college instructor explained: "If we ask for it, the company will provide it. Basically, the company's evaluation is not very detailed; it is

just like qualified, can be converted to permanent staff." (T3:224). Students shared this view. As one put it: "The comments are usually positive and template-based, and they will not say anything negative about you." (S2:336).

In another instance, workplace supervisors left no comments, delegating them to the HR department or to the students themselves. The formative value of feedback was completely neglected. As one workplace supervisor explained: "The intern will bring the internship supervisor evaluation form, and the HR department will stamp it. We do not need to write anything, as this is part of the standard internship process." (W2:029). In some cases, students themselves wrote their own evaluations: "Some of the comments were left for us to write ourselves; they did not write them, and after we finished writing, we just needed the signature of the leader of the implementing unit." (S4:401).

As with workplace supervisors, college instructors also provided minimal (if any) feedback. Most college instructors denied the need to provide individualized feedback to student interns. Instead, they indicated that general feedback was required. As one college instructor explained: "Generally, we do not provide much or only give simple comments because we do not see much substantial content in them." (T8:296). The absence of specific individualized feedback was noticed by students. As one commented: "In the comments, the teachers usually encourage us to continue working hard and mention that we have learned a lot during the week." (S3:379).

Inflated and ignored grades

Grades from educational organizations for internship assessments lacked rigor and were often inflated. As one college instructor described: "Based on the score, if you see that they are cooperating, it would be around 80–85." (T4:242), and from another: "Generally, workplace supervisors can give close to full marks, and many even give full marks." (T7:276). Many students devalued the outcomes of college-based internship assessments, claiming that the grades became irrelevant immediately after they left college. As one student said: "I feel like, as long as your score is not extremely low, there will not be a big difference." (S2:337).

When students were about to graduate, they prioritized an ideal job over a high grade. As one student explained: "I think that once you start working, your identity changes from that of a student to that of an employee. So, whether you have good grades does not really matter." (S1:319). Another student explained: "Because the main thing is that you can graduate smoothly when you go out into society, and everything else seems less important." (S4:404).

Focus on discipline

Student attitude and discipline were the most highly regarded in internship assessments. College instructors required only that students conform and be attentive. The extent to which students complied with teachers' requests and followed college rules was a major consideration in grading. As exemplified below, this view was held by both college instructors and students alike:

> For example, when the college issues some notices and asks for their cooperation, it asks whether you have completed your weekly report on time. Also, when the teacher notifies you, do you respond immediately, or do you need the teacher to follow up? The teacher will have a clear understanding of these situations and will give you a grade accordingly. (T2:209)

> The assessment would be more effective if the assessment criteria were adjusted to our specific job tasks. (S1:308)

Overall, the grading criteria were either absent or lenient. Most college instructors graded in a norm-referenced manner (i.e., evaluating students relative to their peers rather than against predetermined criteria) and believed specific standards were unnecessary. Even when criteria were used, they appeared to serve only as a loose guide. A college instructor said:

> We do not need very strict grading criteria. We can tell at a glance whether their writing is excellent or good. Of course, each teacher has their own grading criteria, but they can still differentiate among the 20 students they supervise. (T8:290)

Box-ticking exercises

Both college instructors and students believed that college-based assessments of internships were simply a prerequisite for graduation rather than a learning opportunity: "As this is a crucial part of the talent development process, it accounts for a significant proportion of the credits. … If they do not complete this course, they will not be able to graduate." (T7:282). A student commented: "An internship is a course that we have to take and is one of the requirements for graduation. Only after completing the internship can I receive my graduation certificate." (S2:334).

Some students were too busy to reflect regularly on what they had learned from the routine work; they chose to cram at the last minute: "Generally, the college requires monthly reports. We would write them towards the end because sometimes we did not have time. Nevertheless, we would ensure they are completed before the deadline, usually in the last week." (S4:388).

Some students even lied about what they had learned in the journals to complete the assignments: "I had to make up some of the content because I had already forgotten what I had done before." (S4:388).

Infrequent progress supervision from colleges

For all college instructors in this sample, on-site visits and direct observation of student performance were constrained by heavy workloads and limited budgets. Instead, all student performance was evaluated primarily through indirect evidence such as written journals and reports. As one college instructor explained the situation:

> The college suggests that we conduct inspections and recommends that everyone do so as well. However, it is not mandatory for us to visit. We may go to some companies once or twice, but overall, there may be travel expenses and time constraints. So, in reality, we go relatively less often. (T8:285)

Need for specific and truthful feedback

In contrast to the prevalent practice of leaving generic feedback on evaluation forms, a few organizations left specific, honest feedback to demonstrate concern for students' career development. A workplace supervisor said:

> If they are average, we may point out any potential issues. For example, when we comment on a student who is not good at communication but has outstanding personal abilities, it may affect the team's communication efficiency. (W3:062)

In a rare case, a college instructor required students to take their assignments seriously and offered them another chance to revise if they failed to meet expectations. A college instructor said:

> I will not give them a score of 20 or 30. They can request a revision of the score if it is too extreme. For example, if they write the same few words as last week, I will send them back to them, and they can rewrite them. (T4:244)

No student participants reported receiving specific feedback from college instructors, indicating that this was truly uncommon. Nevertheless, the lack of formative feedback was largely attributed to the heavy workload. On average, each of them had to supervise around 20 students per cohort in addition to their normal teaching workload (see Table 5).

Minimal use of self-reflection data

Another formative use of internship assessments, namely, their capacity to stimulate students' self-reflection, was also neglected by most college instructors. A college instructor said:

> If they sincerely write the weekly journal, it is meaningful for their internships because they have to reflect on what they have done this week, what they have learned, or what they have felt, right? And then, what should they do next? It should have some guiding significance for them. (T4:238)

Some students echoed the view that journals served only limited self-reflective functions: "Regarding the internship log, it was mainly for us to keep a record and provide feedback on our work." (S1:304).

Workplace Assessments

Table 6 below includes the categories, sub-categories, and definitions of workplace assessments.

Possible transition to full-time employment

If the students were excellent and the organizations planned to recruit new staff, internship opportunities could lead to full-time jobs. One workplace supervisor said: "For most of our internships, we recruit them as candidates for our talent development program. We make it clear to students that we are not recruiting short-term interns but are aiming to develop them for specific positions." (W8:148), and from another: "Sometimes, if they are outstanding, we may want to keep them, but it also depends on staffing. (W9:187)

Nevertheless, the selection criteria for possible full-time positions were more stringent than those for short-term positions. A rigorous selection was applied to eliminate those deemed unsuitable. The screening process proceeded through several rounds. Two workplace supervisors mentioned: This evaluation usually takes two weeks to decide whether to continue their training or find a better match for them, so as not to waste their time or ours." (W2:021), and according to another: "If we are evaluating interns who plan to stay, we can end the internship early. This means that we believe their abilities in certain areas are relatively poor." (W3:063).

TABLE 6: Workplace assessments.

Category	Sub-Category	Definition
Brief Probationary Procedures (*n* = 128)	1. Possible Transition to Full-Time Employment (*n* = 48)	Student interns could be considered for full-time employment after successfully passing a rigorous selection process.
	2. Brief Probationary Procedures (*n* = 42)	Probationary procedures on temporary staff, such as student interns, were typically brief and conducted only once.
	3. Focus on Learning Ability and Attitude (*n* = 32)	Workplace supervisors evaluated interns primarily on their ability to learn new skills quickly and demonstrate a responsive work attitude.
	4. Unsecured and Non-Selective Internships (*n* = 19)	Due to the limited college-enterprise partnerships, students had to find internship placements independently and often accepted whatever opportunities were available.
	5. Limited Skill Development (*n* = 6)	Interns were frequently assigned routine, fragmented tasks, which offered limited opportunities for skill development.
Improving Learning (*n* = 41)	6. Specific Feedback and Continuous Monitoring in Health Sciences (*n* = 31)	In the health sciences, student interns underwent systematic, ongoing assessments and received detailed feedback on their performance.
	7. Specific Feedback on Conditions (*n* = 10)	Specific feedback was typically provided to student interns who performed exceptionally, or to those who were given opportunities to transition to full-time employment.
Lightweight Evaluations (*n* = 6)	8. Irrelevant Judgments (*n* = 6)	Within college-enterprise cooperation units, workplace supervisors did not evaluate students for organizational benefit and withheld negative comments from students.

Episodic and non-systematic procedures

For temporary employees such as student interns, the first evaluations they underwent were the probation procedures. The job requirements and assessment standards for interns were less harsh than those for formal employees. During probation, workplace supervisors observed and communicated with interns to assess their abilities and familiarity with the tasks. The probation was primarily a one-off, with no further follow-up. One student said: "There is no assessment at our internship company because it is small. They basically assigned me a task, and as long as I completed it on time, it was fine." (S2:331). From another student: "After about a month, when I had mastered the entire process, the team leader would secretly come to observe for any mistakes or issues, but there was no formal written record. It was more of an informal assessment." (S4:397).

By contrast, when these external organizations offered opportunities to convert short-term internships into full-time positions, they conducted thorough, ongoing probation procedures for those interns. As two workplace supervisors described: "Based on their performance in the simulations and our previous observations, including theoretical scores and periodic assessments, we will give a comprehensive evaluation and make a decision." (W5:092), and "The conference is used to understand a person's

specific learning situation, progress, and mastery over a given period, such as at the end of a stage or on a monthly or weekly basis." (W8:149).

Focus on learning ability and attitude

Given that students' professional knowledge and skills were negligible due to limited work experience, workplace supervisors assessed whether the student interns had the potential to become competent professionals. They were concerned that the interns could excel at work and adapt quickly to the workplace. Two workplace supervisors said: "It mainly focuses on two aspects. First, we look at how well they have learned the basic knowledge. Second, we value their understanding and adaptability." (W1:004), and "Their attitude towards work is also taken into account. Are they proactive? Do they take initiative and responsibility? Are they willing to learn? How efficient are they in their work?" (W5:086).

Unassured and non-selective internships

Educational institutions failed to establish stable cooperation with external organizations to provide internship opportunities for their students. Most students found their internships through websites, campus recruiting, or family connections. A college instructor said: "Students usually find their own internships. Colleges cannot arrange internships for all students, and no company can accommodate that many students at once." (T1:188).

Sometimes students had to accept internships misaligned with their subject areas when there were insufficient openings in the job market. As one student explained: "From a disciplinary perspective, some interns work within their field of study, whereas others enter unfamiliar industries and need to develop new skills." (T1:192).

Limited skill development

Most of the time, the tasks assigned to interns were repetitive and fragmented, resulting in minimal skill development. As one workplace supervisor explained:

> Because if they are only here to participate in an internship and try it out, their time is very short, so they may not be able to go very deep into our entire process. In this case, we may give them some tasks they are capable of, with more fragmented tasks for them to participate in. (W3:041)

Furthermore, no systematic training and assessment was provided for interns, as external organizations were reluctant to invest time and resources in temporary employees. As one workplace supervisor put it:

> Some organizations noted that interns may require approximately three months of training. If the internship lasts only three months, most of the placement period may be spent on training, providing limited benefit to the company. (W9:186)

Similarly, although some student interns recognized that they were not yet ready to undertake highly skilled or managerial roles early in their careers, they expressed dissatisfaction with the limited opportunities to apply what they had learned in college. A student explained:

> Because I have just started working, I will not be assigned highly technical or leadership tasks. Instead, I will be given simple or routine tasks that anyone can do. Sometimes, I feel like I have skills but nowhere to apply them. (S2:326)

Specific feedback and continuous monitoring in health sciences

In contrast to the other three disciplines, the workplace assessment procedures in health sciences were continuous and systematic. Almost all students participated in ten-month rotational internships (see Table 3). Before they left, each of the major hospital departments conducted theoretical tests and simulations. As one student described:

> During the internship, the hospital has simulations. There are quite a few skill assessments, especially in nursing. As long as you rotate through a department, you will be assessed. The simulation is specific to each department. The written test is usually scored out of 100. (S3:364)

Providing specific and accurate feedback on simulations or observations was common in health sciences. Workplace supervisors often diligently gave detailed corrective feedback after assessments at the end of each month. A workplace supervisor explained: "For simulations, detailed feedback will be provided on each item. If you forget a step or do it improperly, there will definitely be feedback. So that you know where you went wrong or how to correct it." (W7:138).

Students also recognized this common pattern of feedback provision, which emphasized specificality and accuracy, as one explained: "After the exam, the hospital instructor provides feedback on steps that were not done correctly, shows us how to perform them correctly, and asks us to improve for next time." (S3:382).

However, from students' perspectives, the continuous examinations could become burdensome. In some cases, student interns were informed in advance of what would be examined and consequently had to spend substantial time preparing. As a result, they studied primarily to pass exams, thereby narrowing their focus. A student said: "Those department exit exams can only reflect a part of it because you already know what will be tested when you start. You might focus more on reviewing those specific areas." (S3:352).

The training manual served as an intermediary, helping educational institutions communicate the expectations and goals they set for students who interned in hospitals. The manual delineated the scope of learning in different departments. As one workplace supervisor commented: "The training manual requires the instructor's signature before the rotation is completed, indicating which content has been mastered, and which remains unclear. The content varies for each department." (W6:111).

However, the technologies or techniques specified in the training manuals were often outdated. The demands that educational institutions placed on students were misaligned with industry requirements. A workplace supervisor said:

> Some techniques may be impractical or outdated and have not been updated in teaching or in textbooks; we now know that, in clinical practice, they lag a few years behind knowledge updates. Their textbooks are less up to date, so they sometimes fall behind. (W7:127)

Specific feedback on conditions

When the situation became higher-stakes, that is, when students were being considered for full-time employment during internships, external organizations paid greater attention to providing individualized, real-time feedback to interns following review meetings or simulation tests. As one workplace supervisor explained: "After the presentations, we may discuss some areas that need attention or improvement during the meeting." (W2:027).

Some students echoed these patterns of practice:

> There was a monthly evaluation, but the timing was not fixed. They tested us on new skills during these evaluations. Moreover, whether there was any certainty in what was previously mastered, whether there was any unfamiliarity, or not. (S4:394)

In addition, when high-performing students were identified, external organizations tended to impress these student interns with specific, encouraging feedback. As two workplace supervisors said:

> For example, if we think a student is good and has potential, we will clearly point out their strengths and areas that need improvement. We will tell them this to encourage them to cherish their talent and engage with us. (W4: 079)

> We will give higher scores and write better comments for students who perform well. We will describe them as outstanding and excellent. (W9:180)

Irrelevant judgements

When the external organizations served as college-enterprise cooperation units, they did not evaluate interns for organizational benefit. That is to say, the workplace supervisors formed irrelevant judgments on the performance and abilities of student interns. Such judgments did not lead to high-stakes consequences, that is, whether the interns would stay or leave. A workplace supervisor mentioned: "We do not really assess them for the company's benefit. When many students come in as interns, it is usually through some college-enterprise cooperation." (W9:168).

At the same time, workplace supervisors were not always forthcoming in communicating their evaluations to interns, particularly when the feedback was negative. As a workplace supervisor, put it: "Sometimes we praise them, but we do not mention the negatives." (W9:182).

DISCUSSION

Summative Grades or Judgments and Formative Feedback

The results indicate that the dominant function of assessment in both settings is summative verification of mastery or compliance, determining that students obey the rules of conduct and eligibility for graduation. The other summative purpose of making a reliable and valid judgment of student performance, and the formative goal of improving student learning, existed in both settings, but was very much an afterthought compared to the compliance-oriented role.

In the college-based internship assessments, although reflective journals could have been used to communicate and provide evidence of students' learning, college instructors largely failed to use these documents or visit students frequently to obtain direct, varied, and sustained evidence of student

performance. The absence of direct, authentic evidence compromised the validity of the college-based internship assessments. This phenomenon has also been documented in previous studies conducted in China and Australia (Jin et al., 2020; McNamara, 2013). In addition, some students found completing the journals time-consuming and repetitive, a concern also reported in previous studies (Massie & Ali, 2016; O'Mahony et al., 2024). Students often completed the journals at the last minute or fabricated content to meet the requirement, suggesting that they needed guidance in recognizing and articulating their learning from work experience. This finding aligns with those of Brodie and Irving (2007) and Boud and Middleton (2003).

Moreover, insufficient consideration was given to the consistency and authenticity of internship experiences across different workplaces and positions in college-based internship assessments. Given the dispersed nature of workplaces, supervisors did not receive systematic training and precise criteria to ensure consistent grading practices. This occurs despite recommendations by Peach et al. (2014) and Richardson et al. (2013) that internship assessments require planning and quality-assurance procedures. Additionally, contrary to O'Neill's (2024) suggestions, assessment forms and criteria did not adequately account for variations across disciplines, work sites, and roles.

Furthermore, workplace supervisors often assigned symbolic grades and left generic comments simply to acknowledge interns' contributions and conclude the internship on a courteous note. These lenient practices echo prior results on elevated or imprecise assessment in internship programs (Bennett-Wimbush & Amstutz, 2011; McKenzie et al., 2025; Milne & Caldicott, 2016). In the absence of strong college-enterprise partnerships, workplace instructors appeared to have little obligation to evaluate student interns. It is therefore difficult to engage workplace supervisors in meaningful contribution to final grades, as suggested by Ajjawi et al. (2020). Nevertheless, in health sciences, largely due to the close connection between colleges and hospitals, students received specific feedback and ongoing monitoring from workplace supervisors. This finding aligns with the proposals by Peach et al. (2014) and Richardson et al. (2013) for establishing a collaborative assessment plan between educational organizations and workplace partners. Overall, the limited attention given to the meaningfulness of grades and comments from workplace supervisors meant that enacted assessment practices were largely detached from policy intentions.

These findings also support Kennedy et al.'s (2011) argument that the high-stakes examination system poses a significant barrier to implementing formative assessment in China. The findings also highlight practical challenges in enacting formative assessment, such as heavy teacher workloads and limited assessment literacy, as noted by Yan and Brown (2021). College instructors were responsible for supervising approximately 18 student interns per cohort in addition to their regular teaching duties. Such workload pressures appear to restrict teachers' capacity to provide detailed feedback and to monitor student performance continuously.

Disjuncture Between College-Based and Workplace Assessment Practices

The findings show that students were generally not selective when choosing internship placements. Instead, they tended to accept the first opportunity offered by the first organization they contacted. Compared with graduates from academic-track universities, who employers often favor, VET graduates are at a disadvantage and have a limited choice of positions or employers that welcome them (Wang & Wang, 2023). Prior to starting their internships, many VET students reported uncertainty about what they were expected to learn from their work experiences, as educational institutions had not clearly defined learning objectives and appeared to assume responsibility primarily for students'

safety and regulatory compliance in the workplace. At the same time, workplaces often failed to take responsibility for developing interns' competencies. Instead, they assigned them simple, routine tasks to avoid investing resources in individuals unlikely to remain with the organization for long (Wu, 2021), probably due to economic efficiency concerns, as suggested by Rainbird (2000). These findings suggest that many tertiary VET institutions in China prioritize completing an internship as a condition for graduation over the quality or extent of students' learning from workplace practice, a pattern that aligns with previous studies conducted in China (Jin et al., 2020; Wu, 2021).

Most external organizations have established formal training and probation procedures for employees. Nevertheless, because most student interns were recruited as temporary staff, their probation procedures were typically less thorough and rigorous than those applied to permanent employees. Comprehensive probation procedures were implemented only when organizations had recruitment plans during the internship period. However, following China's economic downturn since COVID-19, many organizations have reduced staff to cut costs, thereby limiting student interns' opportunities to transition into long-term employment. Hence, in most situations, workplaces do not rigorously evaluate student interns for the students' educational or developmental purposes.

For student interns, workplace assessment primarily took the form of a brief probationary period lasting the first few weeks of the internship. Workplace supervisors relied on simulations, observations, or review meetings to assess interns' abilities and familiarity with job tasks. However, such assessments were typically conducted only once at the initial stage of internships, rather than through multiple sources of evidence collected over time to establish a comprehensive understanding of student performance, as is commonly practiced in workplace assessment systems in Europe (De Vos et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study reveals a lack of attention to providing specific feedback and continuous monitoring to support formative assessment goals, except in the health sciences discipline, as well as a failure to ensure the effectiveness and meaningfulness of summative grades or judgments across both college and workplace settings. The findings further indicate limited cooperation between educational institutions and external organizations in assessing student interns, as evidenced by the lack of well-defined learning plans and assessment protocols, specific criteria, assessment-literate instructors, and supervisors. This reflects the weak integration of internships into the college curriculum. These results portray China's Tertiary VET assessment in quite a dark light; but it is worth remembering these challenges have existed in other jurisdictions and other disciplines. Creating high-quality formative and summative assessment of knowledge and practice is difficult.

To address these issues, despite the incompatibility between formative assessment policies and high-stakes examination systems in China, a feasible starting point would be to further develop formative assessment policies at both the governmental and institutional levels. This development would provide college instructors and workplace supervisors with clear procedures and a shared understanding of their purposes, as recommended by Chen et al. (2021). In addition, to extend the formative assessments into internship programs, the learning and assessment elements of internships should be intentionally designed and integrated into the college curriculum to support meaningful learning from workplace experiences, as suggested by Zegwaard et al. (2023). Workplace supervisors should work with students to develop learning plans and assessment designs, and receive training in assessment and feedback expertise, particularly in delivering critical feedback, as recommended by Richardson et al. (2013) and Peach et al. (2014). Compliance-based criteria should be separated from performance-oriented criteria

to improve the clarity and practicality of the assessment criteria, as recommended by McKenzie et al. (2025). Additionally, students should conduct thorough research on the roles and employers before undertaking the internship, as suggested by Richardson et al. (2013).

LIMITATIONS

The participants were from only four VET subject fields. This limits the generalizability of the findings to other subject fields. Moreover, all participants were from Guangdong province, further limiting the generalizability of the findings to other regions of China.

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The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues related to Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE).

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