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Exploring Emotional Intelligence on Career Readiness: A Case Study of Rural Vocational College Students During Mandatory Quasi-employment Internship in Longnan City

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of rural revitalization and China TVET system reforms, this qualitative case study explores how emotional intelligence (EI) shapes career readiness among three rural students from Longnan Vocational and Technical College during mandatory quasi-employment internships, with supplementary insights from one supervisor. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews, student reflection notes, and institutional documents between November 2025 and January 2026, then analysed through thematic analysis. Findings show that while students possessed basic self-awareness and strong intrinsic motivation, they lacked effective self-regulation, empathy, and social skills, and faced prominent emotional challenges (interpersonal tension, task pressure-induced anxiety, and student-to-employee identity confusion). EI was found to influence career readiness through three core pathways: emotional regulation boosting workplace adaptability, empathy fostering teamwork, and self-motivation enhancing career self-efficacy. Overall, EI acts as a dynamic, context-dependent resource that enables rural TVET students to convert emotionally demanding internship experiences into career readiness outcomes, providing key implications for rural TVET curriculum design, internship supervision, and policy formulation.

Keywords
Emotional intelligence; Career readiness; Rural TVET students; Mandatory quasi-employment internship

1. Introduction

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is pivotal to nurturing skilled talents for China's rural revitalization and regional economic development (Ministry of Education, 2024). As a key link between rural labor markets and industrial demand, rural TVET students face several unique barriers, including limited formal work exposure, insufficient social capital, and weak workplace adaptability (Hou et al., 2020; Abd Rahman et al., 2025). Mandatory quasi-employment internships—an integral TVET curriculum component—simulate formal employment, requiring students to complete tasks under organizational management with academic supervision (Lloyd et al., 2019).

Emotional Intelligence (EI)—defined by Goleman (1995) as learnable skills (self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, social skills)—is a key predictor of workplace success. Prior research confirms its positive correlation with career adaptability, resilience, and job

performance (Crane et al., 2020; Motlhanke & Naong, 2021). However, Chinese TVET research primarily focuses on curriculum design, skill training, and policy analysis, with limited attention to students' emotional experiences (Li & Wang, 2023). Notably, qualitative studies exploring how EI operates in real internships to shape rural TVET students' career readiness remain scarce.

Longnan City, a mountainous rural area in southern Gansu with underdeveloped industries and limited graduate career opportunities, is representative. Local rural TVET students typically intern in service, manufacturing, or agricultural sectors, facing greater emotional and adaptive pressures than urban peers (Gansu Provincial Department of Education, 2023). This context underscores the urgency of exploring their EI and career readiness. Focusing on this specific group, this study addresses the research gap and provides context-specific implications.

Longnan rural TVET students face significant emotional challenges during mandatory quasi-employment internships, and local employers report that many graduates lack emotional intelligence–related career readiness skills (Singh, 2024; Jafari & Yazdi, 2024). Despite the recognised importance of emotional intelligence, existing research shows three major gaps, namely the neglect of rural TVET populations in favour of urban or general vocational groups, an over-reliance on quantitative methods that limits understanding of students' emotional experiences, and insufficient attention to the dual academic–employment pressures inherent in mandatory quasi-employment internships (Ngubane et al., 2024; Tripney & Hombrados, 2013; Saunders, 2016; Karmazinuk & Helik, 2025; Hou et al., 2020; LoMonten & Kurtz, 2023).

To address these gaps and support the exploration of students' self-perceptions of emotional intelligence, key emotional challenges, and emotional intelligence pathways to career readiness, this qualitative case study investigates rural TVET students' emotional experiences and the relationship between emotional intelligence and career readiness during internships.

2. Literature Review

This literature review synthesizes existing research on emotional intelligence (EI) and career readiness in vocational education, drawing on Emotional Intelligence Theory and Social Cognitive Career Theory. It critically examines international and domestic empirical evidence on the role of EI in students' career transitions, with particular attention to the underexplored context of rural vocational students undertaking mandatory quasi-employment internships. By identifying conceptual and methodological gaps in prior studies, this review establishes the theoretical and empirical justification for the present qualitative case study conducted in Longnan City.

A growing body of international research confirms a positive association between emotional intelligence (EI) and career readiness across vocational and youth populations. Studies have shown that EI significantly predicts adaptability, teamwork, and emotional resilience during internships and early employment stages (Crane et al., 2020; Lloyd et al., 2019; Motlhanke & Naong, 2021). Emotional and social competency training has also been found to enhance job retention and workplace adjustment among vulnerable youth groups, highlighting EI as a critical non-technical competency in work-integrated learning contexts. Collectively, these findings position EI as a key enabler of successful school-to-work transitions.

However, existing domestic research—particularly within the Chinese context—remains lim-

ited in scope and population focus. Most studies concentrate on urban university students or general vocational cohorts, often employing quantitative survey designs. For example, studies conducted in Hong Kong and mainland China have linked EI to career adaptability, self-efficacy, and resilience, yet they largely exclude rural TVET students and rarely address mandatory internship contexts (Hou et al., 2020; Li & Wang, 2023). Although evidence suggests that rural vocational students score lower in EI dimensions such as self-regulation, empathy, and social skills, few studies explore how these EI gaps concretely shape career readiness during workplace-based learning. This gap underscores the need for qualitative, context-sensitive research focusing on rural TVET students' lived internship experiences.

Within public higher vocational and technical education (PHTVE), EI is increasingly recognised as a core non-technical competency that complements technical skill development and supports holistic workplace adaptation (ACTE Online, 2024; Li & Zhang, 2025). Drawing on Goleman's (1995) five-dimensional EI framework—self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills—PHTVE-oriented EI emphasises context-specific capabilities such as managing technical frustration, collaborating during internships, and coping with workplace pressure. Empirical evidence indicates that higher EI among vocational students is associated with improved mental well-being, reduced burnout, higher internship satisfaction, and stronger supervisor-rated adaptability and employability (IJRR, 2025; Li & Zhang, 2025).

Despite its recognised value, EI integration within PHTVE remains structurally constrained. Curricula continue to prioritise technical training, with limited explicit attention to EI development, and many vocational educators lack formal training in EI pedagogy (HRMARS, 2025). These limitations are particularly pronounced among rural student populations, whose restricted social exposure and workplace familiarity further hinder emotional and interpersonal skill development. As employers increasingly value EI alongside technical competence in fast-paced, collaborative work environments, this misalignment poses a challenge to PHTVE's goal of producing genuinely "job-ready" graduates (Ibrahim et al., 2025).

Mandatory quasi-employment internships—compulsory, credit-bearing placements that combine academic supervision with real workplace responsibilities—constitute a central component of PHTVE systems (Brand et al., 2013; Lynch, 2000). These internships place students in a dual-pressure environment, requiring them to meet both academic expectations and employer performance standards. Prior research indicates that such settings intensify emotional challenges, including role conflict, task pressure, and identity transition from "student" to "employee," making EI particularly salient for successful adaptation (Nguyen et al., 2024; Rosita et al., 2024).

For rural TVET students, these challenges are amplified by limited social capital, reduced exposure to professional environments, and fewer opportunities for informal workplace learning (Fields, 2013; Cardona, 2025). Although career readiness in PHTVE is widely conceptualised as a multidimensional construct integrating technical skills, self-efficacy, outcome expectations, vocational interests, and career goal clarity (LeBouthillier, 2024; Foley & Lytle, 2015), most existing studies focus on urban institutions and quantitative outcomes. Consequently, little is known about how non-cognitive factors—particularly EI—operate within the lived experiences of rural students navigating mandatory quasi-employment internships.

Guided by Goleman(1995) Emotional Intelligence Theory and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Bandura, 1986; Foley & Lytle, 2015), this study conceptualises EI as a set of emotional and interpersonal competencies that shape students' emotional regulation, self-efficacy,

outcome expectations, and career goal formation during internships. SCCT provides a robust framework for explaining how emotional competencies interact with cognitive and personality factors to influence career readiness outcomes, particularly during critical transition periods from education to employment.

Despite strong theoretical foundations and growing empirical interest, existing research reveals three key gaps: the underrepresentation of rural TVET students, an overreliance on quantitative methodologies, and insufficient attention to mandatory quasi-employment internships as emotionally demanding learning contexts. Addressing these gaps, the present study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine how emotional intelligence shapes career readiness among rural TVET students in Longnan City, thereby contributing context-rich evidence to both EI and vocational education literature.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018) to explore the complex relationship between EI, emotional challenges, and career readiness in a real-world context. A case study is appropriate because it allows in-depth investigation of a bounded system (rural TVET students in Longnan during mandatory internships) and captures rich, context-specific data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The design focuses on students' lived experiences, aligning with the qualitative goal of understanding "how" and "why" EI influences career readiness.

This study adopted purposive sampling to recruit well-informed participants (Patton, 2015; Etikan et al., 2016). The sample comprised three rural TVET students from Longnan Vocational and Technical College who had completed at least three months of mandatory pre-employment internships in technical or service-related fields and were willing to share their emotional experiences and reflective notes. In addition, one internship supervisor with at least three months of experience mentoring rural TVET students was selected to provide supplementary insights into students' emotional performance and career readiness (De Wee, 2024; Mitcham, 2021; Ngubane et al., 2024).

This qualitative case study employed multiple data sources to gain an in-depth understanding of how emotional intelligence (EI) influences career readiness among rural TVET students during mandatory quasi-employment internships. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, internship reflection notes, and institutional documents to ensure methodological triangulation.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four participants, including three rural TVET students and one internship supervisor. Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes, was audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim. Interview protocols were aligned with the research questions. Student interviews focused on self-perceptions of emotional intelligence, emotional challenges encountered during internships, and the perceived influence of emotions on career readiness. The supervisor interview explored students' emotional performance, common workplace challenges, and the relationship between emotional intelligence and internship outcomes (Ngubane et al., 2024; Motsatsi, 2024; Rutakumwa et al., 2024; Pino et al., 2017).

To complement interview data, each student submitted two to three critical reflection notes (500–800 words each) documenting emotionally salient events during their internships, such as interpersonal conflicts, task achievements, or stress-related experiences. These reflections provided first-hand insights into students' emotional regulation, self-awareness, and adaptive

strategies.

In addition, institutional documents from Longnan Vocational and Technical College were collected, including students' final internship reports (containing both supervisor evaluations and self-assessments) and official internship management guidelines. These documents offered contextual information and were used to cross-validate interview and reflection data, thereby enhancing data credibility (Chand, 2025; Hsu, 2025).

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. The analysis proceeded through four iterative stages.

First, data familiarization was achieved through repeated reading of interview transcripts, reflection notes, and institutional documents, enabling the researcher to gain a holistic understanding of participants' emotional experiences and career-related perceptions (Wilton, 2017; Parameswaran et al., 2020). Analytic memos were written to capture initial insights related to emotional challenges, EI-related behaviors, and career readiness outcomes (Sackman-Ebuwa, 2024; Alfarajat, 2025).

Second, inductive coding was conducted to label meaningful segments of data using descriptive codes such as "self-awareness of anxiety," "interpersonal conflict," and "growing professional confidence." These codes were then organized into broader analytic categories aligned with the research questions.

Third, codes were grouped into higher-order themes through constant comparison (Sackman-Ebuwa, 2024; Alfarajat, 2025). Three overarching themes emerged: (1) students' self-perceptions of emotional intelligence; (2) key emotional challenges during internships; and (3) pathways through which emotional intelligence influences career readiness. Sub-themes were identified within each theme to capture nuanced patterns.

Finally, the themes were interpreted in relation to Emotional Intelligence Theory and Social Cognitive Career Theory. Representative participant quotations were integrated into the findings to enhance analytic transparency and credibility.

The trustworthiness of the study was ensured following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Triangulation across interviews, reflection notes, and institutional documents strengthened credibility. Thick descriptions of participants, internship contexts, and the rural setting of Longnan supported transferability. Dependability was enhanced through the use of consistent interview protocols, while confirmability was ensured by maintaining an audit trail consisting of coding records and analytic memos (Meydan & Akkaş, 2024; Bin Ibrahim et al., 2025; Chen et al., 2025; Zou et al., 2024; Ranney et al., 2015; Cheung & Tai, 2023; Carcary, 2020).

Ethical standards were rigorously upheld throughout the study. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were informed of the study's purpose, data usage, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant identities, and all identifiable information was removed. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored in encrypted folders accessible only to the researcher (O'Sullivan et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2020; Subedi, 2025; Allen & Wiles, 2016; Knight, 2023).

Overall, the qualitative methodology adopted in this study provided a systematic and flexible approach to exploring rural TVET students' emotional intelligence within the context of mandatory quasi-employment internships. By integrating multiple data sources and a theory-driv-

en thematic analysis, the study offers in-depth insights into students' emotional challenges, adaptive processes, and the mechanisms through which emotional intelligence contributes to career readiness.

4. Results and Findings

The analysis of interview data followed a systematic three-stage coding process grounded in established qualitative research principles. The following subsections present the coding outcomes at each analytical stage, demonstrating how raw interview data was systematically transformed into meaningful conceptual categories that illuminate the research questions.

4.1 Coding Results

The coding process began with open coding, which served as the foundation for subsequent analytical stages. This initial phase involved careful examination of interview transcripts to identify meaningful units of information and assign preliminary conceptual labels. Through this systematic process, patterns and themes gradually emerged from participants' narratives about their mobile vocabulary learning experiences, as detailed below.

4.1.1 Open coding results

Table 1 synthesises the results of the open coding analysis by illustrating how emotional intelligence shapes career readiness among rural vocational students in Longnan during mandatory quasi-employment internships. Drawing on 3 reference points extracted from four interview transcripts using NVivo 12.0, the analysis generated 10 initial categories that were subsequently organised into 3 overarching themes aligned with the research questions. These themes capture students' self-perceived emotional intelligence, the major emotional challenges encountered in workplace communication and adaptation, and the specific pathways through which emotional intelligence influences career readiness.

Table 1. The research question and research findings correspond to the theme

Research Question	Finding - Themes
RQ1: How do rural TVET students in Longnan perceive their emotional intelligence during mandatory quasi-employment internships?	Theme 1: Students' Self-perceptions of Emotional Intelligence
	Sub-theme 1.1: Self-awareness: Recognition of Emotional States
	Sub-theme 1.2: Self-regulation: Difficulty Managing Negative Emotions
	Sub-theme 1.3: Empathy and Social Skills: Limited Understanding of Others
	Sub-theme 1.4: Motivation: Intrinsic Drive to Succeed
RQ2: What key emotional challenges do these students encounter in workplace communication and adaptation?	Theme 2: Key Emotional Challenges in Workplace Communication and Adaptation
	Sub-theme 2.1: Interpersonal Tension: Conflicts with Colleagues and Supervisors
	Sub-theme 2.2: Task Pressure: Anxiety from Skill Gaps and High Expectations
	Sub-theme 2.3: Identity Confusion: From "Student" to "Employee"
RQ3: What specific pathways do rural vocational students' emotional intelligence take to shape their career readiness during mandatory quasi-employment internships?	Theme 3: Pathways of EI Influencing Career Readiness
	Sub-theme 3.1: Pathway 1: Emotional Regulation Enhances Workplace Adaptability
	Sub-theme 3.2: Pathway 2: Empathy Fosters Teamwork Ability
	Sub-theme 3.3: Pathway 3: Self-motivation Promotes Career Self-efficacy

Specifically, the figure highlights key emotional intelligence deficiencies among rural vocational students, including difficulties in emotion regulation, limited empathy in interpersonal interactions, and fluctuating self-motivation. It also identifies major emotional challenges ex-

perienced during internships, such as interpersonal tension with colleagues and supervisors, task-related pressure arising from skill gaps and high performance expectations, and identity confusion during the transition from "student" to "employee." Most importantly, Table 1 delineates three core pathways linking emotional intelligence to career readiness: emotional regulation enhances workplace adaptability, empathy fosters teamwork ability, and self-motivation promotes career self-efficacy. Together, these pathways explain how emotional competencies developed and enacted during mandatory internships translate into students' preparedness for future employment.

4.1.2 Spindle coding results

As the second stage of the coding process, the core of axis coding is to deeply analyze the attribute characteristics and internal relationships of each category based on the initial categories formed by open coding. Through continuous comparative analysis, the initial categories are classified and integrated according to specific logic to extract more abstract main categories and name them. In this study, through the axis coding process, three main categories, B1 to B3, were finally formed, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of main axis coding indicators

Main Axial Codes	No. of Reference Points	Open Coding	No. of Reference Points
B1: (EI Self-perception)	4	A1: (Self-awareness)	3
		A2: (Self-regulation)	3
		A3: (Empathy & Social Skills)	3
		A4: (Intrinsic Motivation)	3
B2: (Workplace Emotional Challenges)	3	A5: (Interpersonal Tension)	3
		A6: (Task Pressure)	3
		A7: (Identity Confusion)	3
B3: (EI Influence Pathways)	3	A8: (Emotional Regulation→Workplace Adaptability)	3
		A9: (Empathy→Teamwork Ability)	3
		A10: (Self-motivation→Career Self-efficacy)	3

4.1.3 Selective coding results

As the final step in the coding process, selective coding focuses on identifying core categories and organically linking and verifying the relationships between open-ended coding and axial coding categories. This process ultimately constructs a mutually supportive and logically coherent theoretical system around the core categories, providing a complete framework for in-depth research. Based on internship interview data of rural vocational school students, this study analyzed and integrated axial coding categories to construct a corresponding conceptual model, laying a theoretical foundation for in-depth exploration of the core issue of "the mechanism by which emotional intelligence influences the career readiness of rural vocational school students during their internships," as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Summary of selectively coded indicators

Selective Coding	Spindle Coding	Open Coding
C: (The Influence Mechanism of Emotional Intelligence on Career Readiness of Rural TVET Students During Internships)	B1: (EI Self-perception)	A1: (Self-awareness)
		A2: (Self-regulation)
		A3: (Empathy & Social Skills)
		A4: (Intrinsic Motivation)
	B2: (Workplace Emotional Challenges)	A5: (Interpersonal Tension)
		A6: (Task Pressure)
		A7: (Identity Confusion)
	B3: (EI Influence Pathways)	A8: (Emotional Regulation→Workplace Adaptability)
		A9: (Empathy→Teamwork Ability)
		A10: (Self-motivation→Career Self-efficacy)

4.2 Thematic Analysis

The findings reveal that rural TVET students in Longnan have basic self-awareness but insufficient skills in self-regulation, empathy, and social interaction—consistent with Li and Wang (2023) observation that rural students' EI levels are lower than urban peers.

4.2.1 Theme 1: Students' self-perceptions of emotional intelligence

All 3 students demonstrated clear self-awareness of their emotional states during internships. For example, S1 (hotel management) described her anxiety when facing customer complaints:

"I knew I was nervous because my hands were shaking and I couldn't speak smoothly. I realized I'm not good at dealing with conflicts" (Interview, S1).

S2 (mechanical manufacturing) acknowledged his anger when colleagues criticized his work:

"I felt angry because I thought I had tried my best. I could tell my face was red and I didn't want to talk to them" (Reflection Note, S2).

This aligns with Goleman (1995) definition of self-awareness as the foundation of EI—students could recognize their emotions but struggled to manage them.

Despite strong self-awareness, students lacked effective self-regulation. S1 admitted to "hiding in the bathroom to cry" after a customer complaint, while S2 "argued with a colleague" instead of calming down. S3 (agricultural technology) described frustration with repetitive tasks:

"I felt bored and wanted to quit but didn't know how to adjust my mood—just forced myself to finish" (Interview, S3).

Supervisor S4 confirmed:

"Many rural students get emotional easily when facing setbacks; they don't know how to calm down or seek help" (Interview, S4).

This reflects the self-awareness-self-regulation gap, a key finding for TVET training(Maluka, 2022; Ismail, 2023).

While sharing self-regulation struggles, students' coping strategies differed. Introverted S1 (hotel management) used passive avoidance (e.g., hiding to cry) for fear of judgment, while

outgoing S2 (mechanical manufacturing) resorted to confrontation (e.g., arguing) to release anger. Neither resolved emotional tension: S1 felt "more isolated" after avoidance, and S2 noted conflicts "delayed work progress" (Interview, S2). This aligns with Goleman (1995), who argues effective self-regulation requires proactive, context-appropriate strategies rather than impulsive/passive responses—highlighting the need for targeted training for rural students with limited prior workplace emotional experience.

Students faced notable challenges in empathy and social skills, especially in interactions with colleagues and supervisors(Lopes etal., 2015; Cartono & Novianty, 2021). For example, S1 failed to recognize a colleague's fatigue when seeking help, noting in her reflection:

"I asked her to teach me reservation handling, but she looked tired and refused. I felt hurt, then realized she'd worked overtime for three days."

S2 struggled to communicate with his supervisor, stating in an interview:

"I didn't know how to report progress—just said 'it's done,' but he wanted details and got angry. I was confused."

These align with Arasu and Durailimgam (2025) finding that vocational students often lack communication skills, a gap worsened for rural students due to limited social exposure. Social skill deficits were prominent in adhering to professional communication norms: S2 admitted,

"I just said 'the parts are assembled,' but the supervisor asked about quality checks and delays—I didn't know to provide that."

S1 also struggled with small talk in team meetings, writing in her reflection:

"Colleagues talked about urban life and hobbies I didn't get, so I stayed quiet,"

which deepened her sense of exclusion.

All 3 students demonstrated strong intrinsic motivation, a key dimension of EI (Mercader-Rubio et al., 2023; Mukokoma, 2020). S1 wanted to "prove that rural students can do well in service jobs," while S2 aimed to "master professional skills to get a good job in the future." S3 noted:

"I want to use what I learned to help my family's farm. This motivation kept me going when I felt frustrated " (Reflection Note, S3).

Motlhanke and Naong (2021) emphasize that motivation enhances resilience—this was evident in students' persistence despite emotional challenges.

4.2.2 Theme 2: Key emotional challenges in workplace communication and adaptation

Students encountered three main emotional challenges during internships, rooted in rural backgrounds and limited work experience:

Interpersonal tension was the most common challenge (Khliefat et al., 2021; Tong & Spitzmueller, 2024). S1 experienced conflicts with colleagues due to "different work styles":

"Urban colleagues are more direct, but I'm used to being polite. They thought I was slow, and I felt excluded" (Interview, S1).

S2 had disagreements with his supervisor over work methods:

"The supervisor wanted me to follow the standard process, but I thought my way was faster. He said I was stubborn, and I felt wronged " (Reflection Note, S2).

The supervisor (S4) explained:

"Rural students are often more reserved. They don't speak up when they have questions, leading to misunderstandings " (Interview, S4).

This reflects cultural and social differences between rural students and workplace environments(Cojocariu & Boghian, 2020).

Task pressure induced significant anxiety (Franken & O'Neil, 2012). S1 struggled with hotel reservation systems:

"I made mistakes in booking rooms, and the supervisor criticized me. I was afraid of making more mistakes, so I became more nervous" (Reflection Note, S1).

S2 faced pressure to meet production quotas:

"The factory required us to assemble 50 parts per hour. I couldn't keep up, and I felt incompetent " (Interview, S2).

S3 had difficulty applying theoretical knowledge to practical work:

"I learned about crop disease prevention in college, but when I faced real diseases on the farm, I didn't know what to do. I felt anxious and useless" (Reflection Note, S3).

This aligns with Hou et al.'s (2020) finding that rural vocational students face skill gaps in internships—these gaps trigger emotional stress.

All three students experienced identity confusion transitioning from "student" to "employee." S1 said:

"At college, teachers are patient, but at the hotel, colleagues expect me to work independently. I didn't know whether to ask for help or try alone" (Interview, S1).

S2 noted:

"As a student, I could make mistakes and get feedback; as an employee, mistakes cost money. I felt pressured to be perfect" (Reflection Note, S2).

This is a common vocational student challenge, but rural students—with limited work exposure—struggle more with role adaptation (Lloyd et al., 2019).

Identity confusion varied by major. S1 (hotel management) faced tension between "student-like dependence" and "employee independence" when handling customer complaints:

"As a student, I could make mistakes and get feedback; as an employee, mistakes cost money. I felt pressured to be perfect" (Reflection Note, S2).

This is a common vocational student challenge, but rural students—with limited work expo-

sure—struggle more with role adaptation (Lloyd et al., 2019).

Identity confusion varied by major. S1 (hotel management) faced tension between "student-like dependence" and "employee independence" when handling customer complaints:

"At college, teachers would help if I made a mistake, but at the hotel, my supervisor said 'you have to solve it yourself " (Interview, S1).

S3 (agricultural technology) struggled with the shift from "theoretical learning" to "practical responsibility":

"In college, we learned crop disease prevention from textbooks, but when the farm's tomatoes got blight, I was responsible for fixing it—I feared costing the farm money" (Reflection Note, S3).

For technical majors like agricultural technology, identity confusion tied to "accountability for tangible outcomes" (Adiprasetio et al., 2025); for service majors like hotel management, it was pressure to "maintain professional demeanor independently"—both reflecting the unique demands of quasi-employment internships (Hou et al., 2020).

4.2.3 Theme 3: Pathways of EI influencing career readiness

The findings identify three specific pathways through which EI influences career readiness, supporting the study's theoretical framework:

4.2.3.1 Pathway 1: Emotional regulation enhances workplace adaptability

Students who developed basic self-regulation skills showed greater workplace adaptability (Merino-Tejedor et al., 2016; Nakhostin-Khayyat et al., 2024). For example, S1 learned to "take a deep breath and smile" when facing customer complaints:

"After a month, I could handle complaints calmly. The supervisor praised me, and I felt more comfortable at work" (Reflection Note, S1).

S2 started to "listen to colleagues' suggestions" instead of arguing:

"I realized their criticism helped me improve. I got along better with them and adapted to the factory's work rhythm" (Interview, S2).

This aligns with Crane et al., (2020) finding that emotional regulation enhances adaptability—rural students' ability to manage negative emotions helps them adjust to workplace norms and tasks.

4.2.3.2 Pathway 2: Empathy fosters teamwork ability

Students with strong empathy fostered better colleague relationships and enhanced teamwork(Bonfield et al., 2024; Wong, 2025). S1 started "noticing colleagues' needs" and offering help:

"When a colleague was busy, I volunteered to answer phones. She thanked me and taught me reservation handling, and we worked well together" (Reflection Note, S1).

S3 learned to "ask colleagues for advice" instead of working alone:

"I consulted the farm manager about crop diseases, and she guided me. We solved the problem together, and I felt part of the team" (Interview, S3).

Supervisor S4 confirmed:

"Students who understand others' perspectives collaborate better—they are more popular with colleagues and contribute more to the team" (Interview, S4).

This supports Goleman (1995), who emphasizes empathy as critical for social interaction; rural students' empathy skills directly boost their teamwork and career readiness.

Students' empathy skills improved gradually through internship experiences, in turn enhancing teamwork (Bonfield et al., 2024; Imjai et al., 2024). As noted earlier, S1 initially failed to recognize a colleague's fatigue, but after the incident, she began "observing colleagues' body language before asking for help".

For example, she learned to check if a colleague's desk was cluttered or if they were sighing before requesting guidance on reservation systems. This small shift yielded more positive responses, and colleagues later volunteered to teach her advanced skills. Supervisor S4 observed this change:

"S1 went from being 'a burden' to 'a team player' because she started considering others' workloads" (Interview, S4).

This aligns with Motlhanke and Naong (2021), who found empathy to be a learnable skill—rural students can develop it through real workplace interactions, but they require opportunities to reflect on their behaviors (e.g., via reflection notes or supervisor feedback).

4.2.3.3 Pathway 3: Self-motivation promotes career self-efficacy

Strong self-motivation enhanced students' career self-efficacy (Cherian & Jacob, 2013). S2 persisted in practicing mechanical skills:

"I stayed after work to practice assembling parts. After two months, I could meet the quota. I felt confident that I can do this job well in the future" (Interview, S2).

S3 used her motivation to learn new skills:

"I wanted to help my family's farm, so I asked the manager to teach me organic farming techniques. I mastered them and felt ready to work in agriculture" (Reflection Note, S3).

This aligns with Social Cognitive Career Theory—intrinsic motivation boosts self-efficacy, a core component of career readiness (Foley & Lytle, 2015).

4.3 Discussion of Findings

Research confirms that emotional intelligence (EI) is crucial for the career readiness of rural vocational school students during their mandatory pre-employment internships. Students possess strong self-awareness and family/region-oriented motivation (unique to rural groups), but due to their rural background, they exhibit deficiencies in emotion regulation, empathy, and social skills, facing emotional challenges such as interpersonal tension, task anxiety, and

identity confusion during their internships. Emotional intelligence influences career readiness through three main pathways: "emotion regulation enhances adaptability, empathy promotes teamwork, and self-motivation strengthens career self-efficacy." This research provides qualitative support for Goleman (1995) theory of emotional intelligence and social cognitive career theory, and emphasizes the need for targeted EI training tailored to the core motivations of rural students.

5. Conclusion

This qualitative case study examined how emotional intelligence (EI) shapes career readiness among rural TVET students in Longnan City during mandatory quasi-employment internships. The findings reveal that although students demonstrate relatively strong self-awareness and intrinsic motivation, they exhibit notable deficiencies in self-regulation, empathy, and social skills. These limitations contribute to key emotional challenges during internships, including interpersonal tension, task-related pressure, and identity confusion when transitioning from "student" to "employee." Consistent with prior research, the study confirms that emotional intelligence plays a critical role in students' ability to adapt to workplace demands and succeed in internship contexts (George, 2024; Goodman, 2025).

Importantly, the findings identify three specific pathways through which EI influences career readiness. Emotional regulation enhances workplace adaptability by enabling students to manage negative emotions and adjust to organizational norms; empathy fosters teamwork by improving interpersonal understanding and collaboration; and self-motivation promotes career self-efficacy by sustaining effort, skill development, and confidence in future employability. These pathways provide empirical support for viewing EI not only as a personal trait but also as a professional competency essential for effective school-to-work transition, particularly for rural vocational students with limited prior workplace exposure (Nthako, 2025; Adewolu Ogwo, 2024).

Overall, the study addresses a notable gap in the literature by offering context-specific qualitative evidence on rural TVET students' emotional experiences during internships. It concludes that integrating EI development into rural TVET curricula and internship structures is essential for enhancing students' career readiness and long-term employability, especially in emotionally demanding and socially complex workplace environments (Motlhanke, 2020).

The findings carry important implications for TVET institutions, internship supervisors, and policymakers. At the institutional level, TVET colleges should systematically embed EI development into pre-internship preparation and internship implementation. This includes offering structured training on emotional regulation, interpersonal communication, and conflict management through experiential approaches such as role-playing and scenario-based learning, as well as establishing emotional mentoring mechanisms that provide continuous guidance and reflective support throughout the internship period (Hodges, 2024; Beckmann & Ehmke, 2025). Integrating EI components directly into vocational curricula—rather than treating them as supplementary skills—can better align technical training with workplace emotional demands (Wang et al., 2025; Li & Leong, 2025).

Internship supervisors also play a pivotal role in shaping students' emotional adaptation and professional identity development. Supervisors are encouraged to adopt supportive and constructive feedback practices, foster inclusive workplace cultures that reduce interpersonal tension, and actively guide students through the transition from student to employee by clarifying

expectations and modeling professional norms (Bakhshandeh et al., 2024; Cruess et al., 2019). Such practices not only enhance students' emotional well-being but also strengthen teamwork and overall internship effectiveness.

At the policy level, greater emphasis should be placed on incorporating EI-related indicators—such as emotional adaptation, teamwork ability, and interpersonal competence—into TVET evaluation and accreditation frameworks. Policymakers can further support EI development by incentivizing collaboration between vocational institutions and enterprises to co-design EI-focused training aligned with industry needs. Additionally, addressing rural–urban disparities through expanded social exposure opportunities, such as enterprise visits or pre-internship work experiences, may enhance rural students' emotional and social readiness for diverse workplace environments (Du-Babcock & Wu, 2025; Nalumansi, 2024).

Based on the findings, this study recommends a multi-level approach to strengthening rural TVET students' career readiness through emotional intelligence development. TVET institutions should integrate EI training into pre-internship programs, assign teachers as emotional mentors during internships, and embed EI competencies within professional courses. Internship supervisors should provide emotionally supportive supervision, encourage inclusive teamwork, and facilitate students' role transition into professional employees. Policymakers should institutionalize EI within TVET quality assurance systems, promote institution–enterprise collaboration, and reduce structural disadvantages faced by rural students through targeted exposure initiatives.

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Ethics Statement

Not applicable.

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