



**THE REFLECTIONS OF REGULATORY ADJUSTMENTS TO
PRE-EMPLOYMENT INTERNSHIPS ON ENGAGEMENT
AND INDIVIDUAL EMPLOYABILITY STRATEGIES:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY WITHIN TWO BANKS IN CENTRAL AFRICA**

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ABSTRACT: *In a banking environment marked by uncertainty and the continuous revision of rules governing pre-employment internships, pre-employment interns develop specific individual strategies to enhance their opportunities for sustainable professional integration. While the literature primarily focuses on normative transitions (school-to-work, employment-to-retirement, unemployment-to-employment), the status of the pre-employment intern remains largely understudied. This study aims to analyze the impact of regulatory adjustments implemented by Cameroonian banks on the engagement of pre-employment interns, and to identify the individual strategies mobilized to enhance their employability prior to the transition towards permanent integration. A comparative qualitative method was employed within two banks (UBA and BICEC), based on in-depth interviews with nine pre-employment interns. The results reveal a dual effect: demotivation for some and self-motivation for others. Self-motivated interns develop personal self-training strategies, notably learning-by-doing, trial-and-error learning, and learning through observation. These strategies lead to temporary or interim forms of integration, without a guarantee of permanence. This study contributes to the literature on employability and career transitions by shedding light on an often-neglected status, while also questioning the transferability of skills acquired in a context of institutional uncertainty.*

KEYWORDS: Employability, professional transition, pre-employment internship, individual learning, integration, bank.



INTRODUCTION

The contemporary labor market, characterized by significant instability and the rapid transformation of professional requirements, compels individuals to continuously enhance their employability to maintain their career trajectory (De Vos et al., 2017). In Cameroon, banks have recently implemented adjustments to the regulations governing pre-employment internships (auteur et al., 2024). These adjustments, manifested as the extension of the internship duration, the absence of a guarantee for definitive recruitment, or the strict application of the legal duration without a contract promise, have generated significant uncertainty for the pre-employment interns. Faced with this uncertainty, interns adopt individual approaches aimed at increasing their internal employability in the hope of sustainable professional integration. While the literature widely explores employability enhancement strategies among job seekers (Van Hooft et al., 2021; Blokker et al., 2023), the specific situation of pre-employment interns remains scarcely documented. Likewise, studies on professional transitions mainly focus on normative transitions (school-to-work, unemployment-to-employment, employment-to-retirement) (Ashforth et al., 2021; Wang & Shi, 2014), whereas the pre-employment to integration transition represents a distinct trajectory that is institutionally regulated (Article 28 of the 1992 Labor Code). This study aims to fill this gap by addressing the following questions: What are the reflections of regulatory adjustments to the pre-employment internship on the engagement of pre-employment interns, and what individual strategies do they mobilize to build their employability in a context of uncertainty? The objectives are to analyze the effects of regulatory adjustments on intern engagement; to identify the individual strategies used to strengthen employability, and to highlight the forms of integration observed in the two banks studied.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review proposes a theoretical framework structured around the notions of decision-making, transitions, and individual employability.

Theoretical Framework: Decision-Making, Transitions, and Employability

Individual Decision Theory (March & Simon, 1958)

According to March & Simon's (1958) decision theory, individuals act based on objectives, perceived opportunities, and constraints. This theory also holds that individual behaviors stem from choices made in contexts of uncertainty. Pre-employment interns, faced with a lack of guaranteed integration, make strategic decisions that guide their engagement, efforts, and learning strategies, choosing voluntarily to self-train or maintain their commitment in the hope of integration, thus illustrating a decision-making process oriented towards maximizing their employability.

Professional Transition

Professional transition designates the passage from one professional state to another, involving a transformation of identities, roles, and reference points (Masdonati & Zittoun, 2012). For José (1996), it constitutes a socio-professional process where the individual



reorganizes their resources in response to a new situation. The work of Akkermans et al. (2024) shows that research on transitions focuses on normative passages, including school-to-work (Blokker et al., 2023), unemployment-to-work (Van Hooft et al., 2021), and work-to-retirement (Wang & Shi, 2014). However, the transition from pre-employment to permanent integration, though understudied, constitutes a specific stage marked by distinct institutional regulation (Labor Code, 1992). In this study, the pre-employment to permanent integration transition is considered a non-normative transition, characterized by uncertainty and a strong dependence on organizational regulation. Furthermore, the work of Anderson et al. (2012) stipulates that the manner in which an individual navigates a transition depends on four categories of factors: the situation, support, self, and strategies. By extension, in our study, regulatory adjustments affect the situation, internal resources constitute the support, skills shape the self, and learning strategies represent the strategies.

Individual Employability

There is no universally agreed-upon definition for the concept of employability. Generally, employability is derived from the English term *employability*, which signifies the capacity to be employed or to make oneself employable. Individual employability corresponds to an individual's capacity to obtain, maintain, and progress in employment (Direnzo & Greenhaus, 2011). Employability also refers to an individual's capacity to seize professional transition opportunities (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Direnzo & Greenhaus, 2011). In this study, it is conceptualized as a capital that pre-employment interns develop through self-training, professional routines, and experiential learning (Le Boterf, 2008; Lépinard, 2023). Furthermore, studies by De Vos et al. (2017) on sustainable employability stipulate that it is a continuous process based on lifelong learning; autonomy, and continuous adjustment to changing environments. This conception illuminates how interns self-train to maintain their employability despite uncertainty. It relies on skills, learning capacity (Forrier & Sels, 2003), adaptability, and the ability to mobilize opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

This research opts for a qualitative method to understand internal processes (motivation, strategies, and perceptions) that are difficult to quantify. The comparative case study (UBA vs. BICEC) allows for the observation of two distinct institutional logics.

Nine in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, five at UBA and four at BICEC, between January and November 2025 in agencies located in Douala-Cameroon. The interactions with these pre-employment interns took place in the waiting room of each bank. The average duration was 15 minutes. Several site visits were conducted. We assigned codes to each intern to ensure anonymity (U1, U2, U3, U4, and U5 for UBA; B1, B2, B3, and B4 for BICEC).

The interview guide comprised four main axes: their perception of regulatory adjustments; their engagement; their individual strategies, and their forms of integration. Although this number of participants was imposed by fieldwork constraints, the number of pre-employment interns interviewed is justified by the homogeneity of the group studied; the exploratory



objective; the repetition of information, and access constraints in the banking sector, reaching the saturation point at the fifth interview at UBA and the fourth at BICEC.

Thematic analysis (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2016) was employed. Coding was performed manually, through constant comparison, and allowed for the grouping of *verbatims* into categories: engagement, strategies, and integration. The saturation point was reached after the ninth interview. The thematic coding unfolded in three stages: firstly, open coding for the identification of all meaning units; secondly, axial coding for grouping into categories, and thirdly, selective coding for articulation around key concepts.

Inclusion criteria for this study comprised interns who were currently in a pre-employment internship at the time of the study; who had been informed of the recruitment uncertainty and had voluntarily agreed to participate. Excluded were interns from other forms (academic, professional not pre-employment); any temporary employee already integrated, and interns whose internship had ended more than 2 months prior.

The following section explores the reflections of the regulatory adjustments related to pre-employment training by the banks on the engagement of pre-employment interns. Self-motivation and self-training, along with demotivation, are analyzed from this perspective. However, only self-motivation and self-training are considered individual strategies for managing the career transitions of these pre-employment interns. These strategies, however, led to different forms of integration. By relying on the theoretical literature, the analysis aims to determine whether the banks' regulatory adjustments to the pre-employment internship reflect on the engagement of pre-employment interns before the transition.

RESULTS

Thematic content analysis was used to group the data (exact text) by theme.

Reflections of regulatory adjustments to the pre-employment Internship on the Engagement of pre-employment Interns

Demotivation

The reflections of regulatory adjustments related to pre-employment training are perceptible in the engagement level of pre-employment interns. For some, they create motivation during the pre-employment internship, while for others, they lead to demotivation at work (Folly, 2024). Indeed, the uncertainty surrounding their definitive integration demotivates some interns. The response of intern B4 from BICEC is consistent with this statement: "*When a bank manager told us during initial contact that recruitment is not guaranteed at the end of the pre-employment internship, this information deeply upset me and took away my motivation for the job*". Intern U5's comments at UBA are along the same lines when he states: "*I started coming to this pre-employment internship without any motivation. I no longer sought to demonstrate any of my skills because I knew my recruitment was not guaranteed in advance, as I had thought*".

This demotivation drives these interns to seek other stable employment opportunities concurrently with their pre-hiring internship period. Intern U5's response at UBA attests to



this position, stating: *"Since I received the information that my recruitment is not guaranteed despite the pre-employment internship, I continue to look for stable employment. If I get a certain and stable job offer, I will not hesitate, I will leave this pre-employment internship".*

Interns U5 and B4 express a loss of engagement linked to the absence of an integration guarantee. These *verbatims* sufficiently demonstrate that the banks' non-compliance with regulations has a demotivating effect on pre-employment interns. The regulatory revisions imposed by the banks weaken the psychological contract between the intern and the organization. As Folly (2024) emphasizes, engagement depends on the individual's perception of their value and the prospects offered. Some interns perceive this as a breach of the psychological contract, generating demotivation, while others adopt a proactive stance aimed at proving their employability and securing future integration. This demotivation thus reflects a breach of the psychological contract due to reduced engagement linked to uncertainty (Folly, 2024; Ashforth & Saks, 1991).

Self-Motivation

Conversely, these adjustments galvanize some pre-employment interns (U1, U2, U3, and U4). They perceive these adjustments as an incentive; an opportunity to prove their worth. Indeed, intern U1's verbatim expresses this motivating effect in these terms:

When I heard a manager say that this pre-employment internship does not guarantee definitive recruitment, that's when I decided I would show them through my work that it would be beneficial for them to keep me long-term. I'm going to work hard, very hard even.

Likewise, interns B1, B2, and B3 at BICEC affirm they are increasingly inclined to use this pre-employment internship period to demonstrate to the bank's managers that they are employable long-term. The absence of a guarantee becomes a lever for engagement. Intern B2's comments echo those of B1 and B3: *"When a BICEC manager told us that the pre-employment internship lasts three months and is non-renewable, and that definitive recruitment is not guaranteed, I told myself that I had to demonstrate my professional assets to the managers".* Uncertainty thus acts as a catalyst for mobilization and professional creativity.

This uncertain context, characterized by regulatory adjustments to the pre-employment internship in the banking sector, further galvanizes and encourages certain interns at both UBA and BICEC to demonstrate their skills in the hope of capturing the attention of managers for definitive retention. These interns find themselves in a dynamic transition situation (Schlossberg; Akkermans, 2024). The next section will therefore highlight the individual strategies developed by these interns in managing their career transitions.

Individual Strategies for Employability Development: Self-Training of pre-employment Interns

The analysis in this section focuses on self-motivated pre-employment interns to gather information on the different individual strategies mobilized to increase their employability and secure the possibility of permanent integration. To achieve their goal, pre-employment interns who adopt a self-motivated stance develop personalized skills through learning-by-doing, trial-and-error, and observation (**Table 1.**).



Learning-by-Doing

Interns individually develop their employability by routinely practicing the bank's activities. Indeed, interns develop professional routines through task repetition. However, this practice requires an individual willingness to learn. The comments made by intern B3 at BICEC confirm this:

I seek to gain more skills within this bank by making maximum efforts to perform the same activities so that I can excel in a specific sector of the bank. I make myself available whenever a manager expresses a need. Sometimes, I will go and offer my services. I tell myself that these skills will increase my chances of being employable and definitively recruited.

Similarly at UBA, intern U2 made the same point as the one at BICEC: "*I make the effort to perform a specific activity every day. Every day, I choose a bank activity that I perform to get used to it*". The routine execution of tasks within the bank thus develops routine and individual skills. This is because routine skills emerge among interns through the force of routines (Pesqueux, 2020).

Trial-and-Error Learning

With the goal of maximizing their employability, some interns, in the absence of a tutor, individually develop their skills by learning from their mistakes. Indeed, when a task is entrusted to them, they use their personal experiences to execute the said task. They may succeed in performing it, at which point they develop personalized skills. In case of failure, the pre-employment intern seeks to identify the origin of the failure independently in order to adjust and perform the task until its correct execution. They learn from their own efforts. The intern thus develops their employability through trial-and-error.

Intern B1's comments at BICEC corroborate this strategic approach, stating:

Right from the start of this pre-employment internship, a manager set me up in front of a machine. I manage on my own. When I'm given a file to process, I read it and make the effort to handle it. When I am told that's not how it's done, I go back and reflect on how to process it differently until my superior tells me it's good. I learn from my shortcomings, from my mistakes.

Along the same lines, intern U1 at UBA reports: "*It happens that I make mistakes while performing a task. Since our arrival, each intern was set up in front of a machine without a mentor. Each intern processes their file individually. When I make a mistake, I try again*".

This dynamic also allows the intern to have visibility into the progression of their acquisitions and skills individually (Lambert and Oudraogo, 2010; Lépinard, 2023).

Learning by Observation

Pre-employment interns, galvanized by the hope of capturing employers' attention for a possible integration, develop their employability by learning through observation during the pre-employment internship. Some pre-employment interns state that they learn by observing other employees while the latter perform a task. Supporting this, intern U3 states: "*When I find myself without anything to do, I stand near a bank employee to observe how they work.*



Sometimes, I ask questions. I do this to learn and be able to practice when the opportunity is given to me". Observation thus becomes a self-training opportunity. The same is true for intern B2, who states: "*It happens that no task is entrusted to me. So I get closer to an employee to observe how they work, taking notes*".

The development of skills allows interns to position themselves as skill providers rather than merely job seekers (Le Boterf, 2008). Although pre-employment interns find individual approaches to increase their employability, the question of their integration remains. The results below highlight the forms of integration for these interns.

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Table 1. Typology of strategies

Strategies	Description	Theoretical Support
Action	Repetition of tasks	Single-loop learning (Argyris & Schön)
Trial-and-Error	Autonomous correction Le Boterf (2008)	
Observation	Expert imitation	Experiential learning

Source: *Field data*.

In a first step, this analysis reveals that these forms of learning applied by these interns, notably action based on repetition; Trial-and-Error based on direct experience, and observation based on imitation and the analysis of expert practices, are crucial for understanding the construction of employability in a context of uncertainty (Pesqueux, 2020; Le Boterf, 2008; Lambert & Oudraogo, 2010; Lépinard, 2023). Secondly, this analysis shows that regulatory adjustments influence engagement, which, in turn, determines the adoption of individual learning strategies that reinforce employability. However, these strategies do not lead to the desired permanent integration but to other forms of integration. These constitute the essence of the next section.



The Different Forms of Integration Resulting from the Development of Individual Employability of pre-employment Interns: Analysis at UBA and BICEC

Interns B1, B2, and B3 at BICEC and U1, U2, U3, and U4 at UBA succeeded in integrating on a temporary or interim basis (**Table 2.**). According to the regulations, specifically the 1992 Labor Code, pre-employment training cannot exceed eight months. Beyond this limit, the intern's recruitment becomes definitive.

Temporary Integration (UBA)

The individual strategies implemented by some interns resulted in temporary integration. All interns at UBA, except intern U5, benefited from temporary integration. The pre-employment period, which lasts 6 months at UBA, was extended by an additional 6 months but without the promise of permanent recruitment. The comments of the interns at UBA attest to this approach: "*All our contracts were renewed for an additional 6 months*". The majority of interns saw their internship extended by six months, without a guarantee of permanent integration.

Interim Integration (BICEC)

Conversely, at BICEC, none of the interns obtained an extension. At BICEC, interns are integrated on an interim basis instead. Indeed, one of the interns was recalled to resolve a specific problem encountered by the banking institution. The intern works for the bank for a predetermined duration and is covered by a contract. Once the problem is resolved, the work ends. In fact, the bank keeps certain interns in their database to benefit from their skills in case of difficulties. One intern (B2) was later recalled for a specific three-month assignment, remunerated as a permanent employee, and stated:

After three months, the pre-employment internship truly ended. The managers told us the internship was over. But after two months, BICEC called me back to solve a confidential problem. The manager who called me clearly said that for the time it took me to solve the problem, I would be paid at the same rank as a permanent employee. But once the work is accomplished, the contract ends. The duration of three months was imposed on me for this purpose.

The acceptance of these different forms of integration by the pre-employment interns further reinforces their determination and decision-making in the process of developing their employability and seeking stable integration.

Table 2. Forms of insertion

Bank	Observed Form Interpretation	
UBA	Temporary	Flexible Regulation (Extension without guarantee)
BICEC	Interim	Pragmatic Regulation (Specific assignment)

Source: *Study results.*



DISCUSSION

In a first instance, the results show that regulatory adjustments play an ambivalent role; demotivating for some, yet motivating for others. These reactions confirm the mechanisms of decision theory (March & Simon, 1958) and underscore the capacity for individual adaptation in an uncertain context.

In a second instance, the analyses reveal that these regulatory adjustments hold a decisive place in engagement and the construction of employability strategies, as indicated by March & Simon (1958), where individual decision-making is strongly influenced by the perception of the context. Interns develop self-training strategies aligned with the dynamics of informal learning described by Le Boterf (2008) and Pesqueux (2020).

In a third instance, the results confirm that regulatory uncertainty strongly impacts engagement. The dual dynamic of motivation/demotivation illustrates the mechanisms described by transition theory (Schlossberg). The individual strategies mobilized correspond to the forms of learning identified by Argyris (1985) and constitute a foundation for sustainable employability (De Vos et al., 2017).

The study enriches the literature on professional transitions by exploring an under-addressed transition; the passage from pre-employment to possible integration. It highlights the importance of informal learning in the construction of employability (Le Boterf, 2008). This study also provides a major theoretical contribution by highlighting an under-analyzed professional status; that of pre-employment interns. It shows that these individuals develop individualized skills, but that the transferability of these skills remains uncertain, particularly due to a strong organizational dependency. In other words, it also highlights how this status lies at the intersection of organizational regulation, professional transition, and informal learning.

However, the observed forms of integration (temporary, interim) remain distant from the intended permanent integration, underscoring a structural dependence on banking organizations.

This study articulates concepts such as organizational regulation, which creates a context of uncertainty that influences the professional transition, which in turn requires individual strategies mobilized within a learning process to strengthen employability, which ultimately conditions professional integration.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze the reflections of regulatory adjustments to the pre-employment internship in two Cameroonian banks on the engagement of pre-employment interns, the individual strategies mobilized to enhance their employability, and the forms of integration observed. The results highlight a dual effect of these institutional adjustments: demotivation among some interns, reflecting a breach of the psychological contract, and self-motivation among others, revealing a proactive logic of investing in their internal employability.



This diversity of reactions confirms the mechanisms described by decision theory (March & Simon, 1958) and demonstrates that organizational uncertainty constitutes a structuring element of the transition process.

The analysis also reveals that self-motivated interns develop informal learning strategies based on action, trial-and-error, and observation. These strategies reflect a situated construction of employability, aligned with contemporary approaches to experiential learning (Le Boterf, 2008; Pesqueux, 2020) and with conceptions of sustainable employability (De Vos et al., 2017). However, the resulting forms of integration, such as temporary extension at UBA and interim assignments at BICEC, remain largely misaligned with the permanent integration objective sought by the pre-employment interns. This underscores the limited transferability of skills developed in an organizational context heavily dependent on internal regulations.

On a theoretical level, this study contributes to enriching the literature on professional transitions by exploring an under-investigated transition; the passage from the pre-employment internship to potential employment integration. It highlights how regulatory uncertainty structures individual employability strategies, thereby reinforcing analyses that situate transition at the intersection of organizational, individual, and institutional factors. On an empirical level, it offers an original perspective on a sparsely documented professional status and emphasizes the importance of informal learning in skill development within a precarious context.

Finally, on a practical level, the results call upon banks to clarify the mechanisms for regulating pre-employment internships, to strengthen intern support, and to consider the psychological impact of uncertainty on their engagement. For future research, it would be relevant to broaden the study to other organizations and to mobilize longitudinal approaches to examine the actual trajectory of interns following the pre-employment period. A quantitative analysis could also make it possible to test the robustness of the identified mechanisms. Thus, this study paves the way for a better understanding of professional transitions in institutional contexts marked by uncertainty and organizational flexibility.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no known financial or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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