

The Practicum Paradox: A Case Study of Ineffective Hands-On Training in a Kenyan Sub-County Office

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Abstract

Background: Practicum programs in Kenya's sub-county offices theoretically provide critical hands-on training for students, yet anecdotal evidence suggests widespread implementation failures. This study investigated the "practicum paradox"—the contradiction between formal training arrangements and ineffective learning experiences—through a case study of a Kenyan sub-county office.

Methods: A mixed-methods case study design was employed involving 45 practicum students, 18 supervisors, and 7 administrators. Data were collected through structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. Quantitative analysis included univariate descriptive statistics, bivariate analyses (Pearson correlations, chi-square tests, independent t-tests), and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test relationships between training structure, supervisory effectiveness, organizational culture, and practicum outcomes. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically using content analysis, with findings triangulated across data sources.

Results: Univariate analysis revealed that 64.4% of students rated training structure as low, 73.3% reported inadequate supervision, and 60% indicated learning objectives were not achieved, with students averaging only 8.4 hours of meaningful work weekly. Bivariate analyses demonstrated strong positive correlations between supervision adequacy and learning outcomes ($r=0.742$, $p<0.001$) and between training structure and satisfaction ($r=0.689$, $p<0.001$). Students with trained supervisors reported significantly higher satisfaction ($M=3.12$) than those with untrained supervisors ($M=1.98$; $t=4.21$, $p<0.001$). The SEM analysis ($\chi^2/df=2.14$, $CFI=0.941$, $RMSEA=0.067$) confirmed that supervisory effectiveness was the strongest direct predictor of learning outcomes ($\beta=0.512$, $p<0.001$), while organizational culture significantly influenced both training structure ($\beta=0.643$, $p<0.001$) and supervisory effectiveness ($\beta=0.471$, $p<0.001$). Qualitative findings revealed that staff viewed interns as burdens, lacked mentorship training, faced crushing workloads, and operated without institutional incentives for quality supervision.

Conclusions: The practicum paradox at the sub-county office stemmed from systemic organizational culture deficits, inadequate supervisor capacity, and structural failures rather than resource constraints alone. Effective reform requires multi-level interventions including mandatory supervisor training programs, redesigned practicum frameworks with clear accountability mechanisms, and strategic partnerships between sub-county offices and academic institutions. These findings have broader implications for strengthening workforce development in Kenya's devolved governance system and improving practicum effectiveness across resource-constrained public sector contexts.

Keywords: Practicum training, hands-on learning, sub-county administration

Introduction

Practical training, commonly referred to as practicum, serves as a critical bridge between theoretical knowledge acquired in academic institutions and the practical competencies required in professional settings. In Kenya, as in many developing nations, the internship and practicum systems are designed to provide students and trainees with hands-on experience that enhances their employability and professional readiness (Friedrich, 2023; Rivaldo & Nabella, 2023; Sendawula & Nakyejwe Kimuli, 2019). Sub-county offices, being the grassroots administrative units

of Kenya's devolved government system, represent vital training grounds where future public servants can gain exposure to real-world governance, service delivery, and administrative procedures. However, despite the structured frameworks and good intentions underlying these training programs, significant gaps often exist between the intended outcomes and the actual learning experiences of trainees (Julius & Audrey, 2025; Kubátová & Kročil, 2022; Sharma & Taneja, 2018). This study examines what can be termed the "practicum paradox"—the contradictory situation where formal training arrangements exist but fail to deliver meaningful hands-on learning experiences. Through a focused case study of a specific sub-county office in Kenya, this research investigates the factors contributing to ineffective practicum programs, exploring the disconnect between policy intentions and implementation realities. The findings aim to provide insights that can inform improvements in practical training systems within Kenya's public sector, ultimately enhancing the quality of workforce preparation and professional development at the sub-county level.

Background of the Study

Kenya's Constitution of 2010 established a devolved system of government comprising 47 counties, each subdivided into sub-counties that serve as key administrative units for service delivery. These sub-county offices handle diverse functions including revenue collection, business permits, health services coordination, agricultural extension services, and community development programs (Dickson, 2024; Mahmood et al., 2023; Nassazi, 2023). As such, they present ideal environments for students from various disciplines—including public administration, social sciences, business, and development studies—to gain practical experience (Julius & Sula, 2025b; Julius & Twinomujuni, 2025). The practicum system in Kenyan higher education institutions is mandated by the Commission for University Education (CUE) and other regulatory bodies, requiring students to complete a specified period of field attachment before graduation (Nancy et al., 2024; Sharma et al., 2023; Zhdanova et al., 2022). This requirement recognizes that classroom learning alone is insufficient for developing the competencies needed in professional practice. Sub-county offices regularly host interns and practicum students from universities, colleges, and technical institutions, theoretically providing them with opportunities to observe, participate in, and learn from actual administrative and service delivery processes (Arinaitwe, 2021; Cenci et al., 2024; Sippel, 2024). However, numerous anecdotal reports and preliminary observations suggest that many practicum placements in sub-county offices fail to provide substantive learning experiences (Julius & Godfrey, 2025; Julius & Mategeko, 2025b; Julius & Sula, 2025a). Trainees often report being assigned menial tasks, receiving inadequate supervision, lacking structured learning programs, or being left idle for extended periods. These challenges reflect broader systemic issues within Kenya's public sector, including limited resources, understaffing, weak institutional capacity for training, and insufficient prioritization of knowledge transfer (Kintu et al., 2019). The consequences extend beyond individual trainees' disappointment, potentially affecting the overall quality of Kenya's future public sector workforce and undermining the devolution system's promise of improved service delivery.

Problem Statement

Despite the institutionalization of practicum requirements in Kenyan higher education and the availability of sub-county offices as training sites, there exists a significant gap between the intended objectives of hands-on training and the actual experiences of practicum students (Julius & Geofrey, 2025). Many trainees complete their placements without acquiring meaningful practical skills, professional competencies, or substantive understanding of public sector

operations (Mangeni, 2023; Margaret & Stanley, 2024; Nicholas et al., 2024). This ineffectiveness manifests through inadequate supervision, absence of structured learning programs, misalignment between trainees' academic backgrounds and assigned tasks, and organizational cultures that view interns as burdens rather than investments in future workforce development (Julius & Mategeko, 2025a). The problem is particularly acute in sub-county offices where resource constraints, heavy workloads, and limited capacity for training coordination converge (Christopher et al., 2022; Moses, 2023; Nduhura & John, 2020). Trainees often find themselves in environments where staff members lack the time, incentive, or training to serve as effective mentors, where institutional mechanisms for monitoring practicum quality are absent or poorly implemented, and where the learning potential of daily operations is not systematically harnessed for educational purposes. This situation represents a waste of valuable training opportunities and fails to adequately prepare graduates for professional roles in the public sector, ultimately compromising service delivery quality and the effectiveness of Kenya's devolved governance system.

Main Objective of the Study

To examine the factors contributing to ineffective hands-on training in the practicum program at a selected Kenyan sub-county office and propose evidence-based recommendations for improvement.

Specific Objectives

1. To assess the current structure, organization, and implementation of the practicum program in the selected sub-county office, including the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders.
2. To identify the specific challenges and barriers faced by practicum students, supervisors, and sub-county office administrators that hinder effective hands-on training.
3. To explore best practices and potential interventions that could enhance the quality and effectiveness of practicum training programs in sub-county offices.

Research Questions

1. How is the practicum program currently structured and implemented in the selected sub-county office, and what are the roles of different stakeholders in the training process?
2. What specific challenges do practicum students, their supervisors, and sub-county office administrators encounter that prevent effective hands-on learning experiences?
3. What best practices, interventions, or reforms could be adopted to improve the quality and effectiveness of practicum training programs in sub-county offices?

Methods.

This study employed a mixed-methods case study design to investigate the ineffectiveness of hands-on training in a selected sub-county office in Kenya. The research was conducted over a three-month period and targeted three main population groups: practicum students who had completed or were completing their attachments at the sub-county office (n=45), supervisors and staff members responsible for overseeing trainees (n=18), and sub-county administrators including department heads and the Sub-County Administrator (n=7). A census approach was used for supervisors and administrators due to their small numbers, while purposive sampling was employed to select practicum students from diverse academic disciplines who had spent at least one month at the office. Data collection utilized multiple instruments including structured questionnaires administered to practicum students and supervisors,

semi-structured interviews conducted with administrators and selected supervisors, focus group discussions held with practicum students, and document analysis of practicum policies, training guidelines, and student evaluation reports. The questionnaires incorporated Likert-scale items to measure variables such as training structure, supervision quality, learning outcomes, organizational support, and satisfaction levels. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 26, beginning with univariate analysis to determine frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations for demographic characteristics and individual study variables. Bivariate analysis was conducted using Chi-square tests, Pearson correlation coefficients, and independent samples t-tests to examine relationships between variables such as the association between supervision quality and learning outcomes, differences in experiences across different departments, and correlations between organizational support and trainee satisfaction. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using AMOS software was employed to test the hypothesized relationships between latent constructs including training structure, supervisory effectiveness, organizational culture, and practicum outcomes, with model fit assessed using indices such as Chi-square/df ratio, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). Qualitative data from interviews, focus group discussions, and documents were transcribed verbatim, coded thematically using NVivo software, and analyzed through content analysis to identify recurring themes, patterns, and contextual factors explaining the quantitative findings (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023). Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings was performed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the practicum paradox, with the integration of multiple data sources enhancing the validity and reliability of the research conclusions. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee and the sub-county office, and all participants provided informed consent with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process.

Results

Table 1: Univariate Analysis of Training Structure and Practicum Experience Variables (N=45)

Variable	Mean	SD	Frequency (%)
Training Structure Quality	2.14	0.89	Low (64.4%), Moderate (28.9%), High (6.7%)
Supervision Adequacy	1.98	0.76	Inadequate (73.3%), Adequate (20.0%), Very Adequate (6.7%)
Task-Academic Alignment	2.31	0.94	Poor (57.8%), Fair (31.1%), Good (11.1%)
Organizational Support	2.07	0.82	Low (68.9%), Moderate (24.4%), High (6.7%)
Learning Outcomes Achievement	2.23	0.87	Not Achieved (60.0%), Partially Achieved (28.9%), Achieved (11.1%)
Overall Practicum Satisfaction	2.19	0.91	Dissatisfied (62.2%), Neutral (26.7%), Satisfied (11.1%)
Hours of Meaningful Work per Week	8.4	4.2	<5 hours (31.1%), 5-10 hours (40.0%), >10 hours (28.9%)
Frequency of Supervisor Interaction	1.87	0.69	Rarely (75.6%), Sometimes (17.8%), Frequently (6.7%)

Note: Variables measured on 5-point Likert scale collapsed into three categories for presentation

The univariate analysis revealed profoundly concerning patterns regarding the quality of practicum experiences at the sub-county office, with mean scores across all critical variables falling below the midpoint of the measurement scale. Training structure quality scored a mean of 2.14 (SD=0.89), with nearly two-thirds (64.4%) of respondents rating it as low, indicating that the sub-county office lacked systematic frameworks for organizing and delivering practicum experiences. Supervision adequacy presented an even more troubling picture with a mean of 1.98 (SD=0.76) and 73.3% of students reporting inadequate supervision, suggesting that the mentorship component—widely recognized as the cornerstone of effective practicum programs—was severely deficient. The alignment between assigned tasks and students' academic backgrounds showed a mean of 2.31 (SD=0.94), with 57.8% reporting poor alignment, demonstrating a fundamental disconnect between the educational objectives of practicum placements and the actual work students were assigned. Most strikingly, students reported spending an average of only 8.4 hours per week (SD=4.2) on meaningful work-related activities, with nearly one-third engaging in fewer than five hours of substantive work weekly, revealing significant underutilization of trainees and wasted learning opportunities.

These descriptive statistics painted a comprehensive picture of systemic failure in practicum implementation, as organizational support scored similarly low at 2.07 (SD=0.82) with 68.9% of respondents perceiving minimal institutional backing for their learning. The consequences of these structural and organizational deficiencies manifested clearly in outcome variables, with learning outcomes achievement averaging 2.23 (SD=0.87) and 60% of students reporting that practicum objectives were not achieved. Overall satisfaction mirrored this disappointment with a mean of 2.19 (SD=0.91) and 62.2% expressing dissatisfaction with their practicum experience. The standard deviations across variables, ranging from 0.69 to 0.94, indicated moderate variability in experiences, suggesting that while the majority faced poor conditions, a small subset of students encountered relatively better circumstances, possibly reflecting departmental variations or individual supervisor characteristics. The frequency of supervisor interaction was particularly alarming at 1.87 (SD=0.69), with over three-quarters (75.6%) rarely interacting with their assigned supervisors, fundamentally undermining the apprenticeship model that practicum programs are designed to embody. These findings collectively validated the existence of the "practicum paradox" and established a quantitative baseline demonstrating that formal training arrangements existed in name but failed catastrophically in substance.

Table 2: Bivariate Analysis of Relationships Between Key Variables

Relationship	Statistical Test	Test Value	p-value	Correlation/Effect
Supervision Adequacy × Learning Outcomes	Pearson Correlation	r = 0.742	<0.001	Strong positive
Training Structure × Overall Satisfaction	Pearson Correlation	r = 0.689	<0.001	Strong positive
Organizational Support × Task Alignment	Pearson Correlation	r = 0.621	<0.001	Moderate positive
Department Type × Supervision Quality	Chi-square	$\chi^2 = 18.43$	0.001	Significant difference

Academic Discipline × Task Alignment	Chi-square	$\chi^2 = 14.67$	0.005	Significant difference
Supervisor Training × Student Satisfaction	Independent t-test	$t = 4.21$	<0.001	Trained: M=3.12, Untrained: M=1.98
Duration of Placement × Learning Outcomes	Pearson Correlation	$r = 0.453$	0.002	Moderate positive
Frequency of Supervision × Skill Development	Pearson Correlation	$r = 0.708$	<0.001	Strong positive

Note: All tests conducted at $\alpha = 0.05$ significance level

The bivariate analysis uncovered several statistically significant relationships that illuminated the mechanisms underlying practicum ineffectiveness and identified potential leverage points for intervention. The strongest relationship emerged between supervision adequacy and learning outcomes achievement ($r=0.742$, $p<0.001$), demonstrating that quality supervision was not merely beneficial but constituted a critical determinant of whether students gained meaningful knowledge and skills from their placements. This robust positive correlation suggested that even in resource-constrained environments, improving supervisory practices could yield substantial improvements in training effectiveness. Similarly, training structure quality exhibited a strong positive correlation with overall satisfaction ($r=0.689$, $p<0.001$), indicating that students who experienced more organized, intentional training programs reported significantly higher satisfaction levels regardless of other contextual factors. The relationship between organizational support and task alignment ($r=0.621$, $p<0.001$) revealed that institutional commitment to practicum quality translated into more thoughtful matching of students to appropriate work assignments, suggesting that the problem was not merely logistical but reflected deeper organizational priorities and values.

The chi-square analyses revealed significant variations in practicum quality across organizational subgroups, with department type showing a significant association with supervision quality ($\chi^2=18.43$, $p=0.001$), indicating that certain departments—likely those with clearer work processes and less acute staffing pressures—provided substantially better supervision than others. Academic discipline also significantly related to task alignment ($\chi^2=14.67$, $p=0.005$), suggesting that the sub-county office was better equipped to provide relevant experiences for students in certain fields, such as public administration, while struggling to create meaningful placements for students from other disciplines. The independent samples t-test comparing students supervised by trained versus untrained supervisors yielded particularly actionable findings ($t=4.21$, $p<0.001$), with those under trained supervisors reporting significantly higher satisfaction ($M=3.12$) compared to those under untrained supervisors ($M=1.98$), demonstrating that supervisor capacity building represented a concrete, achievable intervention with measurable impact. The moderate positive correlation between placement duration and learning outcomes ($r=0.453$, $p=0.002$) suggested that longer placements allowed students to progress beyond orientation phases and engage in more substantive work, though this relationship was weaker than supervision-related factors, indicating that duration alone was insufficient without quality interactions. Finally, the strong correlation between frequency of supervision and skill development ($r=0.708$,

$p < 0.001$) underscored that regular, consistent mentorship contact—rather than occasional or ad hoc interactions—was essential for translating work experiences into genuine learning, providing further evidence that the critical failure point in the practicum system was the human dimension of guidance and feedback rather than simply the availability of work tasks.

Table 3: Structural Equation Modeling Results for Practicum Effectiveness Model

Path Relationship	Standardized β	SE	CR	p-value	Hypothesis
Training Structure \rightarrow Learning Outcomes	0.387	0.089	4.35	<0.001	Supported
Supervisory Effectiveness \rightarrow Learning Outcomes	0.512	0.094	5.45	<0.001	Supported
Organizational Culture \rightarrow Training Structure	0.643	0.102	6.31	<0.001	Supported
Organizational Culture \rightarrow Supervisory Effectiveness	0.471	0.088	5.35	<0.001	Supported
Resource Availability \rightarrow Training Structure	0.298	0.076	3.92	<0.001	Supported
Supervisor Capacity \rightarrow Supervisory Effectiveness	0.556	0.091	6.11	<0.001	Supported
Learning Outcomes \rightarrow Practicum Satisfaction	0.728	0.098	7.43	<0.001	Supported

Model Fit Indices: $\chi^2/df = 2.14$, CFI = 0.941, TLI = 0.928, RMSEA = 0.067 (90% CI: 0.051-0.083), SRMR = 0.058

Note: All paths significant at $p < 0.001$; model demonstrated acceptable to good fit across all indices

The structural equation modeling analysis provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex, interconnected factors driving practicum ineffectiveness, with all hypothesized paths achieving statistical significance and the overall model demonstrating acceptable to good fit across multiple indices ($\chi^2/df=2.14$, CFI=0.941, TLI=0.928, RMSEA=0.067). The model revealed that supervisory effectiveness exerted the strongest direct influence on learning outcomes ($\beta=0.512$, $p<0.001$), surpassing even the effect of training structure ($\beta=0.387$, $p<0.001$), thereby confirming through multivariate analysis what bivariate correlations had suggested: that the quality of supervisor-student interactions represented the most critical proximal determinant of whether practicum experiences translated into genuine learning. However, the SEM analysis illuminated that supervisory effectiveness itself was not an isolated variable but rather was substantially influenced by organizational culture ($\beta=0.471$, $p<0.001$) and supervisor capacity ($\beta=0.556$, $p<0.001$), revealing a cascade of causation whereby systemic organizational factors shaped individual supervisor behaviors, which in turn determined student outcomes. The particularly strong path from organizational culture to training structure ($\beta=0.643$, $p<0.001$) demonstrated that the absence of formal, systematic training frameworks reflected deeper institutional values and priorities rather than merely technical or resource constraints. These findings carried profound implications for understanding why the practicum paradox existed and persisted at the sub-county office, as the model revealed that surface-level problems—poorly structured programs, inadequate supervision, minimal learning—were symptoms of upstream organizational and capacity deficits. The significant path from resource availability to training structure ($\beta=0.298$, $p<0.001$), while statistically significant, was notably weaker than the organizational culture effect, suggesting that blaming resource constraints alone for practicum failures would be empirically unjustified; rather, how existing resources were prioritized and deployed mattered more than their absolute availability. The supervisor capacity construct's strong influence on supervisory effectiveness ($\beta=0.556$, $p<0.001$) highlighted a critical gap in the system: supervisors lacked not only time but also the knowledge, skills, and potentially motivation to serve as effective mentors, pointing to the need for systematic capacity building

interventions. Finally, the extremely strong path from learning outcomes to practicum satisfaction ($\beta=0.728$, $p<0.001$) validated that student dissatisfaction was not mere complaining but rather a rational response to objectively inadequate learning experiences, and that improving satisfaction would necessarily require addressing the substantive quality of training rather than peripheral comfort factors. The model fit statistics, with CFI and TLI values approaching 0.95 and RMSEA within acceptable bounds, provided confidence that this theoretical framework accurately represented the underlying causal structure of practicum effectiveness, offering a validated foundation for designing targeted interventions that addressed root causes rather than symptoms.

Conclusion

This mixed-methods case study conclusively demonstrated that the practicum paradox at the selected Kenyan sub-county office was real, pervasive, and rooted in systemic organizational and capacity failures rather than isolated implementation lapses. The quantitative findings revealed that the overwhelming majority of practicum students experienced inadequate supervision, poorly structured training programs, misalignment between academic preparation and assigned tasks, and minimal organizational support, resulting in failure to achieve learning objectives and widespread dissatisfaction. The bivariate analyses established that supervision quality, training structure, and organizational support were not merely associated with better outcomes but were statistically significant predictors of learning achievement and satisfaction, with particularly strong effects for supervisory adequacy and consistency of mentor-student interaction. The structural equation modeling provided a validated causal framework demonstrating that these proximal training failures stemmed from deeper organizational culture deficits, insufficient supervisor capacity, and suboptimal resource allocation priorities, revealing that effective reform would require multi-level interventions addressing both immediate supervision practices and underlying institutional values. The qualitative data contextualized these statistical patterns, exposing that sub-county staff viewed interns as burdens rather than investments, lacked training in mentorship approaches, operated under crushing workloads that left no time for student guidance, and worked within institutional structures that provided neither incentives for good supervision nor accountability for neglect. These converging lines of evidence established that Kenya's devolved governance system, despite its promise of grassroots capacity building, was failing to harness sub-county offices as effective training grounds, thereby perpetuating workforce development gaps that would ultimately undermine service delivery quality and institutional effectiveness. The study's findings transcended this particular case, illuminating broader challenges in practicum systems across resource-constrained public sector contexts where formal training arrangements exist but organizational ecosystems lack the capacity, culture, and commitment to actualize them into meaningful learning experiences.

Recommendations

Establish a Structured Supervisor Training and Certification Program: The sub-county office, in collaboration with county government human resource departments and academic institutions, should develop and implement a mandatory training program for all staff members who supervise practicum students, focusing on mentorship skills, feedback provision, work-based learning facilitation, and strategies for integrating students into meaningful work despite resource constraints. This program should include initial certification requirements before staff can be assigned

supervisory responsibilities, annual refresher training, and a formal recognition system that acknowledges effective supervision as a valued professional competency in performance evaluations and promotion considerations.

Redesign the Practicum Framework with Clear Structure, Accountability, and Institutional Support: County and sub-county leadership should reformulate practicum policies to include mandatory orientation programs, individualized learning plans co-developed by students and supervisors, regular progress check-ins, structured rotation schedules across departments, and defined learning milestones that align with students' academic disciplines. This framework must be accompanied by dedicated administrative responsibility for practicum coordination, allocation of protected time for supervisors to engage with students (recognizing supervision as legitimate work rather than an additional burden), and establishment of feedback mechanisms where both students and supervisors can report challenges and suggest improvements.

Develop Strategic Partnerships with Academic Institutions for Mutual Capacity Building: The sub-county office should formalize partnerships with universities and colleges that send practicum students, creating collaborative agreements that specify mutual responsibilities, establish regular communication channels between academic supervisors and workplace mentors, enable joint training sessions where academic faculty share disciplinary expectations while sub-county staff explain operational realities, and facilitate research collaborations where students' academic projects address genuine office challenges.

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