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## Public Service Internship Programme towards Graduates' Employability: A Case of Limpopo Province, South Africa

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**ABSTRACT**

The South African government introduced the Public Service Internship Programme as a measure to assist graduates in increasing their employability in the public sector by providing them with practical and accelerated work experience programmes that expose interns to specific occupations. Whilst the gap between theory and practice has often been considered from an employer and academic standpoint, less is known about the graduate perspective. This study sought to investigate the contribution of the Public Service Internship Programme towards graduate employability, with a distinct focus on Limpopo Province in South Africa.

A mixed-method approach was adopted as the research approach. The main aims for adopting this method were to fully comprehend and analyse the detailed findings of the study as provided by the respondents. The data collection was made using semi-structured interviews and questionnaires and the data analysis was done using content analysis. The sample size consists of 30 respondents drawn from the three respective hosting institutions which are the Limpopo Office of the Premier, Limpopo Department of Public Works and Polokwane Municipality. The findings of the study show that the programme does expose the graduates to practical work in the public service to assist them in becoming employable. The study concludes that the programme does afford the interns the skills to enter the labour market.

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**Introduction**

Youth experience worse labour market outcomes than adults worldwide, but this varies greatly internationally. The development of skills can contribute to structural transformation and economic growth by enhancing employability and labour productivity as well as helping countries to become more competitive. The policies of many developed economies require that young people be either in education or employment, and South Africa is not immune to this global trend.

In 2002, the South African government introduced the Public Service Internship Programme (PSIP), and one of its objectives was to reduce the high rate of unemployable graduates by appointing them as graduate interns for a period of 12 months, therefore, instilling them with the public service skills and experience required by the public service in South Africa, (National Youth Policy, 2015). Internships are "work-based schemes whose purpose is to provide skills and knowledge in the workplace". Despite the vast research that has been conducted on the national level, little has been done to address the problem of graduate unemployment provincially. This article aims to ascertain the impact of public service internship programs on graduates' employment.

Limpopo Province consists of three comprehensive universities, one university of technology and seven Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Colleges that have produced well-groomed scholars, yet the province does not have enough capacity to harness their skills ([www.gov.za](http://www.gov.za)). Although most of them get an internship programme for 12 months, most of these graduates end up unemployed after the programme. Majove affirms that this is evident from the high levels of graduate unemployment and a stagnant economy. Given these facts, this study's researcher seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of Public Service Internship Programmes in enabling graduates to be absorbed into the labour market.

The Limpopo Provincial Treasury Report states that unemployment in the country and Limpopo province is exacerbated by a lack of skills in the labour force. This observation in the graduate unemployment rate highlights the issues that still need to be addressed in terms of creating employment. In terms of this indicator, Limpopo's graduates could be regarded as the most vulnerable cohort in the South African working-age population. The retention of new graduates is a strain for many South African companies. Johnson sustains that employers have two options to succeed in this talent war: to become and remain an Employer of Choice, i.e., the ability to attract and retain people with the required profile, or to develop, retain and efficiently utilise the employer's existing talent pool.

## **Key Objectives of the Study**

This research aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of Public Service Internship Programmes (PSIP) towards graduates' employability.

### **Objectives**

- To determine the impact of public service internship programmes towards the employability of graduates.
- To propose measures that can enhance the success of the public service internship towards the employability of graduates.
- To determine the exit strategy in place for graduates who have completed their internship training.

## **Literature Review**

The views of various researchers on the Public Service Internship Programme towards graduate employability are discussed. Different sources of knowledge including books, databases, journals, periodicals, international papers, government publications, published statistics from research firms and other sources mostly limited to the period between 2014 and 2020 were used to acquire background information as well as data on public service internship programmes towards graduate employability. The notion of graduate employability is gaining increasing interest and importance as being an essential outcome of many degrees in higher education institutions. Globally, graduates from higher learning institutions are still facing the same problem regardless of the amount of time and money they have spent acquiring education. Graduate employment remains the topic of much concern in South Africa.

## **Goals and Benefits of Public Service Internship Programmes**

According to the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA), the South African government introduced the public service internship programme to assist the graduates in meeting the strategic staffing needs of the public service by providing practical and accelerated work experience programmes that expose interns to specific occupations. The main objective of the internship programme, according to their policy was to establish a framework whereby people could gain practical experience for future permanent appointment in the labour market. In South Africa, public service internship programmes are regarded as practical programmes to assist with the continuous development of graduates for future appointment in the labour market, this is according to the Department of Public Service and Administration.

The reason for the development of graduate programmes is to intensify the collaboration between all stakeholders to meet future skills demands. One form of such collaboration often included as part of graduate programmes is the internship. Employers generally believe that internships should develop job skills as well as interpersonal skills [1-5]. Internships enable soft skills such as teamwork, problem-solving, decision-making etc. Learning such critical skills should, therefore, be considered a very important goal of the internship programmes.

## **Methods used by Employers to Assess Graduates' Employability**

### **Skills**

Employers require graduates who can perform the tasks expected of them in the workplace. Interns are valuable support and help to current employees, even if tasks given to them have modest levels of responsibility. By taking on tasks as an intern, other colleagues can pursue creative or more advanced projects. As an intern, you can expect tasks that help you learn a new skill or more about the industry and work with fellow employees on specific projects, research or campaigns. Most internships have supervision to provide feedback on their work.

Various companies in nearly every industry offer internship programmes. There are advantages for both the employer and the intern, and they might vary in terms of duration, responsibility level, and compensation. Interns are employed by sectors of all sizes to provide crucial assistance to the company and its current staff. Employers can invest in their future success through internships, and they may even find new talent and future leads. Lower-level duties can be completed by interns, freeing up time for colleagues to work on other projects, although more internships now include responsibilities beyond administrative labour.

Graduates are expected to have certain sets of skills for them to be considered employable. The decision to hire a graduate is based on the graduate's qualities and abilities in addition to discipline-specific knowledge and skills. Employers believe that employers have expectations that graduates will have these employability skills. According to the British Council Commissioned Institute of Education (2014), employers are dissatisfied with the skills and qualities of graduates. South African employers specified that the most important graduate skills subsumed willingness to learn, teamwork, problem-solving and interpersonal skills [5-8].

However, in a study by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and Higher Education South Africa (HESA), a considerable gap between employer expectations and what graduates offered was exposed. That missing or overlooking any factor will result in a negative effect on graduate employability. This model provides guidelines on how employability can be enhanced, which means that the graduates must be actively involved in improving their skills and be willing to learn new ways of doing things. Additionally, Jonck identifies a lack of practical skills and experience as a contributing factor influencing the growing unemployment rate of graduates. They are not only expected to enhance the skills linked to their discipline but must also possess generic skills and attributes which are transferable to many occupational situations and areas.

Employers feel that graduates lack the relevant skills to compete in the open labour market. According to, there is a mismatch between the type of workers supplied and those demanded in the labour market which is the cause of structural unemployment. Thus, the notion of preparing graduates for employment has drifted to the concept of employability and what it means to be a higher education graduate or gradateness in the past decade or so. In today's world, employers do not hire employees based on their educational status.

Employers have different perspectives on what they expect from graduates. Studies exploring the expectations of employers in South Africa point to these varying perspectives. According to Griesel and Parker, employers in the SA context expect graduates to have four categories of skills, namely:

- basic skills and understanding;
- knowledge and intellectual ability;
- workplace skills and applied knowledge; as well as
- interactive and personal skills. Graduates constantly need to prepare themselves for the continuously altering nature of the workplace, and for meeting their employers' needs.

## **Global Perspective on the Public Service Internship Programme**

The retention of a new graduate is a challenge for many companies. Turnover among qualified graduates is elevated due to their skills to pursue and locate alternative employment and the low supply

of acquainted employees in the job market; this is according to International Labour Organization. In a study by Mncayi, it is highlighted that South African graduates amongst other factors, perceived a lack of labour market knowledge and a lack of self-confidence as reasons for unemployment.

In another study by Msimanga, it is also indicated that a lack of connections is a hindrance to employment opportunities. Internships are an essential part of the career ladder in many professions. They are part of a modern, flexible economy and are useful both for the interns and for employers. The natural deduction from the above literature is that the networks which are made through the public service internship programmes have common mutual benefits for all the participants and the hosting institutions. They establish opportunities for important input by industry around what was learned. The public service internship programmes provide the most crucial skills in navigating the real-world workplace and begin to introduce the intern to broader networks. Those with internship experience are more likely to find jobs and earn more.

### **Graduate Employability and Unemployment**

The notion of graduate employability is gaining increasing interest and importance as being an essential outcome of many degrees in higher education institutions. Globally, graduates from higher learning institutions are still facing the same problem regardless of the amount of time and money they have spent acquiring education. With a staggering 10.6% of graduate unemployment, graduate employment remains the topic of much concern in South Africa. The global unemployment rate for young people is 13% while their counterparts' rate is 4.3%.

In developing countries such as South Africa, high unemployment among graduates is a socio-economic challenge with an economic cost and many other facets, which include reducing economic welfare, reducing output, and human capital. Higher education is perceived by many people as a pathway to enhance employability. Graduate unemployment in South Africa is problematic. By all accounts, graduate unemployment is a challenge that the South African government has yet to find tangible solutions for in addition, unemployment is likely to affect young people more than older people, as a result, it is seen as a ticking time bomb that can lead to an Arab spring-like rebellion in South Africa. The gravity of challenges South Africa is faced with require multipronged efforts that simultaneously promote the development of sustainable livelihoods, reduce poverty and inequality, and prioritise the development of policies such as the internship programmes. These will create an enabling environment for youth development (South African Graduate Development Association.

### **The Public Service Internship Programme's Exit Strategy**

An exit strategy is necessary when one's employment ends to avoid situations of being desperate for another job, frustration due to lack of income or not knowing what to do with your life, exit strategies are different based on the reasons for leaving your job. In an employment context, exit strategies are becoming increasingly important not just for corporate executives but for all employees. No matter what the context, creating an exit strategy should be an important part of any contingency plan and risk management strategy and risk management strategy.

The absorption of new graduates into the labour market remains an enormous challenge to many employers in South Africa. The turnover among newly qualified graduates is high due to their

ability to pursue and find alternative employment and the shortage of skilled employees in the market. For many students, a degree is seen as a means of securing employment. Likewise, in South Africa, it was found that students enrolled on tertiary education to improve their job prospects and the likelihood of career success.

According to Lourens, higher education provides individuals with subjective contentment and financial benefits. Students cite employment prospects as the primary purpose of pursuing higher education. A successful internship programme requires adequate resources to structure and monitor the programme. As part of the South African Human Resource Development Strategic Framework, vision 2015, the introduction of internships contributes significantly to the career planning and talent management initiatives for the public service sector. The framework supports the notion that in adopting internships as one of the strategies, the country will eradicate the plague of unemployment and lack of skills not only in the public service but in the entire economy [21-23].

Training an intern does cost a lot of resources and time. The older practice of rotating interns across many departments should be avoided since this undermines the development of problem-solving skills. There should be opportunities for self-reflection as this gives interns a chance to self-monitor their progress. According to South Africa spent a total of R1.07 billion on training and development in 2015/16 and R1.08 billion in the 2016/2017 financial period at the national level alone. By ensuring that this kind of investment is recuperating there must be a way to retain the interns. This is done by retaining the interns who demonstrate an interest in building a long-term relationship with the hosting institutions and in turn, increase the return on the investment made.

The issue of the post-internship impact on labour market outcomes, graduates' absorption is to date still a topic of great concern for the South African labour market especially with former interns still struggling to find employment. This has led to the growth in the labour force amid fewer jobs being created in the South African economy and more graduates failing to find jobs. The literature on the goals of the Public Service Internship Programme, methods used by employers to assess graduates' employability skills, the influence of the Public Service Internship Programme on graduate employability and unemployment as well as the exit strategy by the hosting institutions for interns were extensively reviewed to establish what has been researched by scholars on those topics to avoid the duplication of studies [24-30].

The reviewed literature acknowledges that the Public Service Internship Programme imparts the graduate interns with skills that contribute to their employability and that it is a valuable programme that contributes to the graduates obtaining practical experience as required by the employers at the workplace. The reviewed literature also indicated that the hosting institutions do not necessarily have a strategy at hand that will assist interns who are exiting their programmes. The main reason for this study is to look at graduate employability, specifically for those who have participated in the internship programmes.

### **Research Methodology**

Kumar (2018) describes research as knowledge production whereby answers should be found through questioning and inquiry. Kumar (2018) further explains that methodology involves techniques and procedures followed in the process of gathering data regarding the research topic in question to answer the research

questions and achieve the stated aim and objectives. A research study can be quantitative, qualitative or a combination of these methods. To fully comprehend the topic and present detailed findings, this study adopted a mixed-method research approach. The main aim for adopting this method was to thoroughly present the findings, to fully comprehend and lastly, to analyse the findings of the study as provided by the respondents.

The data collection was made using semi-structured interviews and questionnaires and the data analysis was done using content analysis. The sample size consists of 30 respondents drawn from the three respective hosting institutions which are the Limpopo Office of the Premier, Limpopo Department of Public Works and Polokwane Municipality. The sample distribution consists of 15 graduate interns (both previous and current) who completed questionnaires, and face-to-face semi-structured interviews for the other 15 participants who consisted of the managers, programme coordinators, mentors, and the human resource officials of the Limpopo Office of the Premier, Limpopo Department of Public Works and Polokwane Municipality. This was to measure the influence of the public service internship programme towards graduate employability.

### **Mixed Method**

Mixed method research is commonly used to obtain different but complementary data on the same topic to best understand the research problem. The researcher used a mixed-method research approach, which included both qualitative and quantitative research approaches to gather data from the participants. The main aims for adopting this method were to fully comprehend the topic and thoroughly present and analyse the detailed findings of the study as provided by the respondents.

### **Sampling**

A purposive sampling technique was adopted to select participants who were relevant to this study. Neuman indicates that purposive sampling uses the judgement of an expert in selecting cases with a specific purpose in mind. The sampling method was useful as only a small division of 30 populations was studied from the target population of 50. This included the 15 interns who completed questionnaires and the other 15 participants who were interviewed consisted of the three (3) Managers, three (3) Programme Coordinators, six (6) Mentors as well as the three (3) Human Resource officials of the Limpopo Office of the Premier, Limpopo Department of Public Works and Polokwane Municipality. The researcher used their judgement about who to include in this sample frame and that allowed the researcher to use prior knowledge to select the elements to be sampled. The identified participants reflect the correct sampling frame; they are the realistic version of the population, the ones that the researcher can identify and access. They provided accurate and reliable information pertinent to the study [31].

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Polit and Hungler, define data as information obtained during a study. In this study, both semi-structured interviews and survey questionnaires were used to collect the research data. The study collected primary data through face-to-face semi-structured interviews with three members of the management, three members of the human resource, three programme coordinators and six mentors in all three hosting institutions: Limpopo Office of the Premier, Limpopo Public Works and Polokwane Municipality. The data collection instruments were compiled by the researcher in the form of interview guides and survey questionnaires. Since the managers are responsible for policy development, the researcher

deemed them fit to evaluate its prospects and constraints and they were in a better place to provide some views on the importance and efficiency of the programme towards graduate employability. The Human Resource officials outlined the methods they use to advertise, appoint, and place the graduate interns in their respective divisions. The mentors are the ones who are responsible for the induction, training, and supervision of the graduate interns, in other words, they are the key drivers of the programme and can, therefore; be able to provide honest views on the programme. The graduate interns as the beneficiaries of the Public Service Internship Programme are the best to relate their experiences and challenges with the programme.

### **Findings of the Study: Empirical Evidence**

This section presents and analyses the data collected from the managers, programme coordinators, human resource personnel, mentors, and Interns. The researcher dealt with empirical findings derived from the case study of 30 participants from the Limpopo Office of the Premier, Department of Public Works and Polokwane Municipality who were interviewed and participants who completed questionnaires.

The data was analysed and interpreted. The research approach, design and procedures were briefly touched upon. The profiles of the respondents were also elaborated upon. The researcher used a purposive sampling method to select the 30 participants for the study. The section is mainly centred around presenting and discussing the main research findings focusing on the relevant objectives and questions the study seeks to answer.

### **The following Conclusions based on the Empirical Research Findings are Drawn.**

Of the respondents sampled, the majority attested to the view that the public service internship programme as implemented by the Department of Public Works, Office of the Premier and Polokwane Municipality has indeed instilled the relevant skills to the graduate interns and that it has provided them with the exposure and experience to have a competitive advantage in the labour market, thus contributing to their employability. This is because the hosting government institutions place their graduate interns according to their qualifications or fields of study. The findings are that the graduate interns are confident that they will excel in future during job interviews be it in the public or private sector.

The following skills are provided by the hosting institutions sampled: good communication skills which enable the interns to be confident and enhance their professionalism. This mainly falls under the interpersonal skills that focus on preparing the interns to be better people by ensuring their overall teamwork; self-confidence; problem-solving solving and decision-making. The technical skills that focus on work-related programmes such as PERSAL, BAS system and others.

The study further found the following weaknesses in the implementation of the graduate internship programme at all three sampled institutions. The first one is the lack of mentor training. It was discovered that some of the mentors were trained to be mentors. The mentors who received training were the very first mentors who were part of the internship programme when it was first introduced in public services. Over the years the mentors were appointed by their supervisors or line managers based on their work experience, track record, commitments, and performance. Overall, there seems to be a lack of monitoring and evaluation for the internship programme in all three sampled institutions. The view is that this makes it difficult for the superiors to intervene

and make informed decisions on the programme. The lack of credentials to access the specialized working programmes is another factor that was discovered. For example, an intern who works in the human resource directorate and is responsible for capturing leaves must rely on their mentor to access the PERSAL system using their credentials for them to carry out the task. This in turn makes the graduate interns feel not worthy or under-valued to some extent.

The interns indicated their discomfort/dissatisfaction with the uniform stipend at one sampled institution. They declared that they are not being paid in line with their level of studies. The stipend is uniform with the interns with a master's or Honours degree getting paid the same stipend as those with the National Diploma or N6. In the other two institutions, their graduate interns get their stipend according to their level of qualifications.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings exhibited in this section are based on the primary data collected from participants at the three said institutions as well as secondary data derived from the literature that provided different contexts on public service internship programmes. The empirical evidence from this study shows that the public service internship programmes by the Department of Public Works, Office of the Premier and Polokwane Municipality do lead to the employability of the interns.

This study aimed to evaluate the influence of the Public Service Internship Programme towards graduates' employability. The objectives were formulated from the aim as follows:

- To determine the influence of the Public Service Internship Programme towards the employability of graduates.
- To establish the measures that will enhance the success of the public service internship towards the employability of graduates.
- To identify the exit strategy in place for graduates who have completed their internship training.
- To provide recommendations that will enhance the success or influence of the public service internship towards the employability of graduates.
- The research questions that the current study intended to address were as follows:
- How does the Public Service Internship Programme influence employability?
- What measures will enhance the success of the public service internship towards the employability of graduates?
- What is the exit strategy that the government has for interns who have completed their internship programme?

The Public Service Internship Programme is a very important and relevant programme which must be supported and encouraged in government institutions as it has helped reduce the unemployment rate amongst the graduates who were part of the programme, therefore, the success of the programme must be promoted and celebrated. Some of the graduate Interns who were once part of the programmes at the three sample institutions are now permanently employed at the very same institutions. This was a win-win situation as the employer saved time in training the new employee because they already had experience that they had acquired from the internship programme.

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