

# The Impact of Internship Programme on Skills Development in the South African Public Institutions: Are Internships Still Relevant?

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**Abstract:** Skills shortage remains one of the challenges of the 21st century in developing countries like South Africa. It is for this reason that a skills development programme such as internship programme has been adopted by South African public and private institutions to enhance skills development, knowledge and experience. Internship programme is one of the programmes targeting a specific group of people. As contemplated by Cabinet in December 2002, internship is a public service graduate work experience programme targeting unemployed graduates aged between 18-35 years. The paper intended to assess the impact of internship programme on skills development. Secondary to the aim, the article looks into the relationship between internship programme and skills development. Lastly, the challenges and opportunities for internship programme were also brought forward. The paper is purely theoretical and collected literature through articles, books, newspapers, internet and other readily available sources with a view of attempting to forge and comprehend how internship programme can be strengthened particularly in public institutions for achieving the main objectives of the programme. The study found that, in general internships have impact on skills development even though some interns are not necessarily satisfied with the monthly stipend as the money is too little while others claim not to be satisfied with the nature of duties they are expected to perform during work hours, as some of the tasks does not add any value on skills development. In addition to the findings, some interns highlighted that they are not sure who exactly their mentor is since there are many different mentors who coordinate and supervise them. The paper concludes that there is a need to clear the confusion on the issue of many different mentors supervising interns. Furthermore, revise the nature of duties interns do, interns should be given tasks that will develop them.

**Keywords:** Internship programme, Mentor, Skills development, Skills shortage, Public institutions

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## 1. Introduction

The discourse on skills development has become a critical issue of modern societal, political and scholarship debate. This is so as most public institutions around South Africa are confronted with skills shortage among other challenges. Skills development refers to a process of equipping graduates from various institutions of higher learning with skills that will help them to be more competitive at work in the near future (International Labour Force, 2010). Nevertheless, every graduate needs the opportunity to turn the theoretical knowledge acquired from the classroom to the practical world. To make this a reality, most public institutions in South Africa have adopted internship programme as one of the skills development component. The introduction of internship programme as part of the skills development initiative has increased dramatically. This is so because even the private sector has adopted it. Hanson (1984) highlighted that internships are used

as tools, mechanisms or platforms were graduates can be able to identify long term career interests. Meanwhile, Basow and Bryne (1993) stated that graduates use internships as an opportunity to fulfill what they have learned at various institutions of higher learning.

Perhaps the most inspiring argument for investigating is the impact of internship programme on skills development is the fact that sometimes interns are not necessarily satisfied with the nature of duties they are expected to perform during work hours, particularly in public institutions. Amongst other things interns find discomfort about making tea for their colleagues and sometimes making copies. As a result, sometimes interns see the programme as something that does not add value to their professionalism and self-improvement. To that extent, little is known as to whether all interns have the same challenges more especially in public institutions. The paper then briefly outlines some of

the important issues revolving around this internship programme with a view of placing possible measures that public institutions could adopt to address these challenges. The article then proceeds on to analyze the relationship between internship programme and skills development in public institutions and its opportunities thereof.

## 2. Placing a Skill in Context

Individual skills such as communication, problem solving, writing, decision making, leadership and ability to work with others can be explained as an intern's achievement, acquisition or an attainment of an ability or potential that has been acquired through an internship programme or a formal training particularly in a work environment (Gryn, 2010). However, skills are an offspring of a combination of knowledge gained from a classroom and the little experience an intern has been exposed to, in a professional work setting. On that note, the author admits that a skill is an acquired ability or talent an intern needs in order to perform out a specific activity over a certain period of time. Bloom (1956) outlined a number of competencies that indicates what is meant by skill. These are competencies such as the individual's ability to perform a set of tasks, an ability to understand what others are doing and lastly the ability of an individual to link performance with an understanding of the performance of other individuals. As it was already mentioned earlier on in this article, an ability to associate with others in a formal work environment is one of the skills that an intern can acquire during the internship period (Adams, 2013).

## 3. Conceptualising Skills Development

Skills development is a process of empowering graduates with skills as a way of preparing them for work environment. Skills development can also be explained as the process of developing a graduate or intern so that they can be able to execute tasks assigned to them in the work environment, through training and mentorship programme (Hirschsohn, 2008:82). Practical skills development is the core activity of any given profession (public administration, education, health) and for survival, growth and sustainability of that particular profession. However, universities sometimes face the criticism that their graduates go to the workplaces unable to perform (Okello-Obura and Kigongo-Bukenya, 2011). It is on this basis that such graduates must

be granted an opportunity to go through internships as part of skills development programme in order to capacitate and prepare them for future work environment. Nevertheless, the discourse on skills development must be introspected on broadly. Skills development programme could add a positive impact not only on the intern but also on the institution, industries, economy and the neighboring countries in the long run. Therefore, lack of skills can have a negative impact on the economy in terms of production, service delivery and innovation (Abrahams, 2018).

Through strategic initiatives such as Joint Initiative on Priority Skills Acquisition (JIPSA), there is an official acknowledgement by government that skills shortage constitute or pose a huge threat to economic growth and development, and that the benefits of skills development are not only limited to the individual alone but also encompass public institutions, private organisations, households and all other sectors and emerging and established industries of the South African economy (Levine & Guy, 2007). Therefore, skills development remains a major weapon in the effort by the South African public institutions in order to create employability and encourage sustainable development. However, skills development programmes are intended to maximize the productive, capable and competitive potential individual through acquisition of different skills (Legoabe, 2010).

## 4. Internship Programme in South Africa: A Facilitator of Skills Development

Millions of young South Africans are excluded from participating in economic activity, and as a result suffer disproportionately from unemployment, discouragement and economic marginalization (Orgill, 2007). High youth unemployment means young people are not gaining the skills or experience needed to drive the economy forward. This lack of skills can have long-term adverse effects on the economy. In South Africa the current lack of skills and experience as well as perceptions regarding the restrictiveness of labour regulations make some prospective employers reluctant to hire the youth (Abrahams, 2018).

To understand the discourse on internship programme, one needs to reflect on the concept of internship. According to Rahman, Kahtun and

Mezbah-ul-Islam (2008), an internship is a pre-professional work experience which aims to provide graduates from various fields of study with the opportunity to gain work experience and exposure in the work arena. This programme allow South African graduates to work in a real world setting whereby every intern is assigned with a specific task to perform on daily basis (Chambers, 2015). Green (1997), contended that internship is a temporary work which an intern could do either to get paid or voluntarily. While National Association of Colleges and Employers (2011), stipulates that an internship is a form of experiential learning that link knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skills development in a professional setting. Internships give students the opportunity to gain valuable applied experience and make connections in professional fields they are considering for career paths; and give employers the opportunity to guide and evaluate talent. Therefore, the programme further aims to create a link that already exists between theory and practice (Garcia, 2008).

Normally, these interns would be assigned with administrative activities to perform as part of their daily activities. Through the internship programme, graduates' interns are exposed to their relevant occupational areas in real work situation. During the programme, interns are expected to bridge the gap between theory and practice and acquire work attributes and be able to make professional decisions even when they are employed anywhere in the near future (Garcia, 2008). According to Oyedele (1995), during the work experiential programme interns are developed to assume work responsibilities, develop the knowledge and attitudes required in their career field for successful job performances. However, the internship programme also assists interns to be more informed about their interests during the internship trajectory. In the sense that interns are able to decide on whether to continue with that particular profession, more especially looking at career opportunities.

Likewise, an important aspect of internships is that they offer rich opportunities for career development by creating links with professionals (Knight, 2008). Literature by Levine and Guy (2007) recognised that internship programme has emerged as the most popular tool among public institutions nowadays. Equally, Gault, Leach and Duey (2010) acknowledged that internship as work based learning project is essentially an open door that public

institutions offer nowadays to those interns who are keen on picking up work experience and exposure. Gault *et al.* (2010) added that internships offer graduates and interns a golden opportunity to work in the areas of their interest. Through this trajectory, interns figure out how their course of study while they apply knowledge to practical issues and this practical learning makes them more appealing candidates for vacancies after internship period, which is normally 12 to 24 months depending with various public institutions.

## **5. The Nature of Internship Programme and Skills Development**

According to Griesel & Parker (2009), graduate internship programmes are optional as one of the job training opportunities. Interns do not get a salary, but receive a stipend paid by the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETA). Unlike student interns who are placed, graduate interns have to apply for the advertised internship opportunities and go through the normal recruitment and selection processes such as interviews (Gryn, 2010). The intention is to afford them opportunities to transform the theoretical knowledge gained from the institutions of higher learning, into practical experience acquired in the dynamic world of work (Harms & Crede, 2010). In both types of internships, interns sign a contract, and operate on a structured competency development programme (Harms & Credé, 2010). They are assigned mentors to supervise their work, assess their competency levels and work performance as well as provide periodic evidence of their progress (Department of Labour, 2005).

The purpose of internship is to address lack of practical work experience and exposure to the realities of the world of work as well as reduce youth unemployment, although on temporal basis (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2012). Internships are practiced in a wide array of careers such as nursing, social services such as teaching, public administration and psychology, law, engineering as well as finance related careers. Internship or placement programs allows students the chance to combine theory and practice in a subject, apply theoretical concepts to a work environment, and induce new knowledge from practical activities (Garcia, 2008). During the internship, interns are given administrative activities such as preparing formal reports (Chambers, 2015).

Internship programme has become a popular theme in public institutions. Kruss (2004) in a South African study on employability and higher education concluded that although employers and recent graduates agree that the undergraduate experience is enormously beneficial in terms both of personal development and workplace effectiveness, they are generally of the view that a degree course does not prepare students for work. These studies show that there is a serious mismatch between intern's aspirations and the reality of the labour market and that interns are insufficiently prepared for the world of work. It is therefore understandable that employers are dissatisfied with the skills and attributes of interns after completing their internship period as such concerns are raised about their lack of soft skills such as problem solving. Kruss (2004) espoused a direct link between internship programme and the job market, expecting public institutions to directly prepare graduates with skills to make them employable. Public institutions were criticized because they do not offer adequate soft skills such as problem solving, communication, managerial skills, leadership skills that one needs to learn across any walk of life (Bradley, 2014). Skills and talent development are thus central to successful internship programmes. Hay (2002) found that skills and capacity building for talent proved to be the most significant factor that pertains to employee well-being and retention. However, the paper is of the opinion that the nature of activities in public institutions should be designed in a manner that interns can be able to acquire and attain the required skills. Therefore, the author fully discourages public institutions to refrain from assigning interns certain tasks that will not benefit them elsewhere in the near future.

## 6. Internship Programme and Skills Development Interface

The world has demonstrated different views on the relationship between internship programme and skills development. Nevertheless, the idea of obtaining a higher (tertiary) qualification has been viewed by many as a stepping stone for locating or improving job opportunities (Lowden, Hall, Elliot & Lewin, 2011:7). In a highly competitive world, tertiary education is sought by many who use it as an added advantage in the labour market. Employers, graduates and Higher Education Institution (HEI) representatives, value work-based learning (such as placements and internships programme) have been identified as particularly effective approaches to promote the

employability of graduates (Lowden, *et al.*, 2011:10). Opportunities such as, placements and internships do not only appear to offer an effective applied method to instilling appropriate awareness, skills and abilities in graduates, but it can also enhance partnerships and resultant collaboration between HEIs and employers (Lowden *et al.*, 2011: 10). It is therefore the authors view that throughout the journey interns can acquire professional skills such as self-management, problem solving skills, verbal communication skills, conflict management skills, develop desirable work habits and attitudes and develop skills to use modern information communication technology and office work equipment's. However, Thomos (2016) along with Velez and Giner (2015) claimed that internship programme develops teamwork skills in the sense that when interns perform in teams, they learn a number of things that could not be taught in a formal classroom session. They learn how to adjust, compromise and cooperate with others. During internship, they learn how to generate ideas, share thoughts and perform collectively, which becomes foundation of their future employment. These scholars' further stands with the fact that; interns are required to be goal oriented throughout the internship period. They have to develop time management skills, where tasks are scheduled in sessions of activity based learning. If they cannot manage their time, they would not be able to survive in the professional work setting. Internship tasks might include completing tasks such as compiling reports, preparing presentations, record keeping, observations and others. Therefore, all these tasks can be doable and achievable provided interns have set different day to day targets and plan accordingly. In essence, during internship period interns learn and develop possible ways of utilizing their time effectively (Bradley, 2014). On that note, these authors highlighted that time management is not only essential for personal development, but also to emerge in a professional environment. As far as the interface between internship programme and skills development is concerned, (Johari & Bradshaw, 2008; Khalil, 2015; Rothman & Sisman, 2016) are of the opinion that internship serve as a good foundation for constructing and developing of personality of interns since it makes them to be objective, boost their level of confidence and lastly motivates them.

## 7. The Impact of Internships on Skills Development

According to Heflin and Thau (1999), internships can be the best platform to develop graduates.

Simply because most of the graduates are still fresh from tertiary level with a thin idea of how the labour market operate. Internship give graduates an opportunity to see what is really happening in the field of work. Furthermore, the impact of internship has more value as compared to the knowledge graduates have gained in a lecture room. In some instance internships assist interns to make a bit of self-introspection on whether they are fit enough to be employed elsewhere at a later stage. On the other side, internship could still be used as a means for interns to identify their weaknesses in the work environment. While the impact of internship varies, the programme could assist one to boost his self-esteem and confidence while engaging with other employees during work hours. In essence, internships help interns to develop the skills to work and associate with many people in a diverse environment. Simply, because not every person has a professional way of working and associating with other people. According to Heinemann, Delfalco and Smelkinson (1992), graduates who participate in an internship placement are likely to gain skills related to three types of learning objectives. The first involves academic objectives that connect theory to practice. Academic objectives develop and strengthen cognitive skills such as problem solving, decision making, critical thinking, and analysis. The second involves career-learning objectives that include determining realistic career options through career testing, developing job acquisition skills, strengthening career-planning skills, and understanding the world of work. As it is already stated elsewhere in this paper, the third and final learning objective involves personal growth such as self-confidence, self-understanding, communication skills, personal and ethical values, interpersonal social skills, and a sense of professionalism.

## **8. Pitfalls and Opportunities of Internship Programme**

Internship programme was introduced to provide interns with the necessary knowledge and work experience by linking theory with practice. However, there are so many challenges and opportunities that play around the programme. On that note, scholars such as Amoako (2011), pointed that the inexperience of interns as well as poor writing skills in English is a huge challenge for the programme. This is so because when interns are still new in the work place find it difficult to prepare weekly reports. As a result, mentors, managers and supervisors are burdened

with the responsibility to nurture and groom them. Bradley (2014), postulated that interns are tormented by the amount of stipend they receive and the fact that internship does guarantee them permanent employment. Therefore, some interns find it fit to resign before the internship can even come to an end. However, Chonco and Folscher (2006) posed a very interesting statement were other interns argued that: "*we are not sure who exactly our mentor is since there are many different mentors who coordinate and supervise us*". If this is the case, then the author is of the view that sometimes interns may take time to adapt to the ways in which every mentor operates. Additionally, too many instructions from different mentors can be confusing at times. While we are still on the challenges of internships, some other interns highlighted that they find dissatisfaction when their supervisors delegate unnecessary duties such as making team for them, while in principle interns should be learning the actual work. As a result, such duties could make interns to resign.

Although the author has demonstrated different challenges that are found around the internship programme, it is therefore necessary to also look deeper into the good side of the internship in the South African public institutions. However, Bradley (2014) is of the opinion that some of the interns have found permanent employment in the very same institutions (Provincial and National Departments) where they used to work as interns. On that note, the author sees it important to highlight the fact that working as an intern can sometimes open more opportunities. Therefore, graduates and interns are advised not to only look at the fact that they will only work for 12 months and leave the office. However, (Tygerburger, 2013), contended that some institutions are efficient as a result of the skills interns have acquired throughout the internship. Therefore, this is a win-win situation as both the (institution and interns) are able to benefit from the internship programme as a whole. According to Adams (2013), one of the programme coordinators highlighted that apart from getting the opportunity of being absorbed as a permanent staff member in the organisation, interns can also network with all other departments thereby opening doors of employment opportunities. Other opportunities that interns are exposed to are skills development and experience which some do not get while studying (Cleary, Flynn & Thomasson, 2006). According to O'Neill (2013), interns have the opportunity to learn writing and communication skills.

## 9. Regulatory Framework Underpinning Internship Programme

According to The Skills Development Act 97 of 1998 the main purpose of the act is to ensure that the skills in public institutions are developed and improved (Skills Development Act, 1998). The Act focuses on specific areas such as creating a framework for the growth of skills, and the development of employees at work, and also the unemployed graduates between 18-35 years. According to the Skills Development Act (1998), the purposes of the Act is to encourage public institutions as the employer to use the workplace as an active learning environment, an opportunity to acquire new skills, an opportunity of new entrants to the labour market to gain experience, and also to employ persons who find it difficult to be employed such as graduates (Skills Development Act, 1998). Nevertheless, the White Paper on National Youth Service (NYS) of 2001 stipulates that the youth service has been adopted by the South African government in 2005 as part of its initiatives to get the youth involved in the reconstruction and development plan of the nation. The objectives of the policy were to facilitate the provision of work experience for young persons with a view to their employment, to encourage participants to develop a sense of responsibility and service to the country and self-respect and respect for authority, to promote among participants, values of discipline, democracy, citizenship and corporation (National Youth Service Act, 1998). In order for the activities to be effectively perpetuated, a board has been set up to carry out functions. Such as develop and monitor orientation, training, approved placement and employment programmes for graduates; providing placement and employment opportunities for graduates and assist in the development of approved employment projects; monitor and evaluate the implementation of the plans and programmes of the National Youth Service and to make to the Minister such recommendations as it thinks fit in respect thereof (National Youth Service Act, 1998).

The National Skills Development Strategy III (NSDS) provides that since 1994, South Africa's new democratically-elected government has realised that the economy is in need of improvement. One of the opportunities identified is the skills development of graduates (Orgill, 2007:14). The NSDS was established in March 2001 with the intention of radically transforming education and training in the nation (Covey, 1999). Though the emphasis of the NSDS

is placed on the training of unskilled graduates to enter the workforce as well as create a livelihood for themselves, the policy also seeks to encourage theoretical learning, facilitate the journey of school leavers from school, college or university or even from periods of unemployment, to sustained employment and in-work progression (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2011).

According to Covey (1999), this policy addresses some of the challenges that impact on the ability of the South African economy to expand and provide increased employment opportunities. One of these challenges is the inadequate skills levels and poor work readiness of many young graduates leaving formal secondary and tertiary education and entering the labour market for the first time. This is compounded by inadequate linkages between institutional and workplace learning, thus reducing the employability and work readiness of the successful graduates from Further Education and Training (FET) and Higher Education Training (HET) institutions, not to mention the many who enter the world of work without a formal qualification (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2011).

## 10. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper undertook to assess and understand the impact of internship programme on skills development with specific reference to South African public institutions. In general, it is found that internship programme is having a positive impact by giving exposure and transferring the necessary skills to graduates and interns. Furthermore, internship programme can provide many opportunities such as networking with potential employers, skills development, preparing one for future employment and providing one with permanent employment. Despite the various advantages of internship programme, the article also brought forward some of the challenges that revolve around the internship programme. One of the challenges is that most interns are not necessarily satisfied with the monthly stipend, as some have to spend too much money on transport costs, groceries and accommodation. As a result, sometimes such pitfalls could make interns to find themselves in a situation where they have to quit the internship programme. Therefore, failure to address these challenges would negatively continue to compromise the main objective of internship programme. On that note, regulatory framework underpinning internship programme

was discussed and it was important to realise that the regulatory framework should always be the first focus on understanding the significance of internship programme on skills development. It can be concluded that much still needs to be done in order to consolidate internship programme with the aim of providing the necessary skills to graduates around the country. For example, interns should be assigned activities that will boost their capacity. Again, public institutions should review the programme on annual basis. On that note, it would be much easier to identify weaknesses of the programme and strengthen it. Furthermore, the concerned institutions should reconsider adjusting the stipend considering the cost of living and lastly public institutions should not run internship programme just for formality purpose. Internship programme must be objective in nature. Therefore, interns must be monitored and evaluated timeously to check as to whether the programme still has impact particularly on skills development. Furthermore, public institutions could benchmark effective ways from private institutions on how to run successful internships that have impact on skills development.

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