Pondering over the nexus between internship programme and skills development: insights from past and present interns

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article history:
Received 17 August 2023
Received in rev. form 23 Sept. 2023
Accepted 29 Sept. 2023

Keywords:
Internship programme, graduates, skills development, unemployment, employment

JEL Classification:
O15

A B S T R A C T

In South Africa, the internship programme was introduced under the Skills Development Act of 1998, with the primary goal of addressing the country's skills shortage and fostering the growth of a skilled workforce. This act laid the foundation for various skills development initiatives, including internships, aimed at enhancing employment prospects and facilitating the transfer and development of essential skills among graduates. As a result, the pursuit of internship programme has become a prevalent practice among university and college graduates in South Africa, as they recognize its significance in securing employment and acquiring the necessary skills. Considering this, the objective of this study was to examine the relationship between internship programme and skills development within three government departments in Limpopo Province. The research employed a quantitative research approach and collected empirical data using semi-structured questionnaires. Seventy-one (71) past and present interns from the three select government departments were surveyed between October and December 2019. The data collected were analysed using Microsoft Excel. The study's findings reveal a positive nexus between the internship programme and skills development. Interns were able to acquire a diverse range of skills. The study recommends that there should be a rotational assignment as part of the internship programme to expose interns to different departments. Internship programme should serve as a valuable platform for the transfer and development of skills, providing interns with meaningful experiential learning opportunities.

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

There are multiple reasons why graduate unemployment persists across South Africa. One important factor is the lack of suitable work experience, which has been identified as a major contributor to the issue (Graham, Williams & Chisoro, 2019). Another factor is the poor quality of the educational curriculum, which has been linked to graduate unemployment in countries like Sri Lanka and Malaysia due to a mismatch between the skills acquired and the demands of the job market (Samaranayake, 2016).

Youth unemployment and a deficiency of skills that meet market demands have been persistent concerns in South Africa since the country's democratic transition (Statistics South Africa, 2021 as cited by Malapane & Mukonza, 2023). Addressing these issues requires combining theoretical knowledge with real-world experience in the workplace (Graham et al., 2019). As a result, work-integrated learning programmes, such as graduate internships, have gained wider acceptance and implementation in South African public institutions, including the Department of Education, the Department of Provincial Treasury, and the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture in Limpopo Province (De Lannoy, Graham, Patel & Leibbrandt, 2018).

Equally, lack of work experience remains a key obstacle for recent graduates, and this issue has also been identified as a root cause of graduate unemployment in Europe (Nez & Livanos, 2010). In response to this challenge, the South African government introduced...
the internship programme in 2002, which has been widely adopted by various government departments, including the three departments selected for this study (Malapane & Mukonza, 2023).

However, the crucial question remains whether there is a relationship between the internship programme and skills development. To investigate this, the researcher has undertaken an empirical study focused on evaluating the connection between the internship programme and skills development, specifically within the three government departments in Limpopo Province. In this study, the internship programme refers to the work experience provided to graduates to gain practical knowledge related to their academic qualifications (Mseleku, 2023). Skills development, as highlighted in a study by Mabeba (2021), is the process of equipping graduates from various higher learning institutions with knowledge and abilities that enhance their marketability (International Labour Force, 2010). Additionally, skills development initiatives aim to provide individuals, including youth, employees, and semi-skilled individuals, with the necessary skills to improve their lives and contribute to the economy (Dunbar, 2013).

This study seeks to examine the nexus between the internship programme and skills development. To accomplish this, the study is divided into several sections, including the introduction, research objectives, literature review, research methodology and design, sampling procedure, presentation of empirical results, and conclusion. Therefore, this paper aims to

i. examine the relationship between internship programme and skills development
ii. examine the relationship between internship programme and skills development at three selected government departments in Limpopo Province, South Africa.

Furthermore, insights from past and present interns in selected departments of Limpopo Province, South Africa will be collected and analysed.

**Literature Review**

**Theoretical and Conceptual Background**

**Theoretical Framework**

In this study, the social learning theory introduced by Bandura Albert in 1977 was embraced. The theory proposed that learning occurs through observation, imitation, and modelling and is influenced by factors such as attention, motivation, attitudes, and emotions. The theory accounts for the interaction of environmental and cognitive elements that affect how people learn (Bandura & Walters, 1977; Kendra, 2022). Social learning theory plays an important role in understanding the relationship between skills development and internship programme. According to social learning theory, individuals learn through observation, imitation, and modelling of others' behaviour. This theory suggests that learning occurs not only through direct instruction but also through social interactions and experiences. (Horsburgh & Ippolito, 2018).

In the context of skills development, which is the purpose of this study, social learning theory emphasizes the importance of experiential learning and the acquisition of skills through practical experiences. Internship programme provide a platform for individuals to engage in real-world work environments and observe and learn from experienced professionals. By being immersed in the workplace, interns have the opportunity to observe and imitate the skills and behaviours demonstrated by their colleagues and supervisors (Hammer, 2011). Through the process of social learning within the internship programme, interns can acquire various skills necessary for their professional development. They can observe and learn how to effectively communicate, problem-solve, collaborate in teams, manage conflicts, and engage in professional interactions. Social learning theory suggests that by actively participating in the workplace, interns can internalize these skills and behaviours and apply them in future work settings (Anjum, 2020). The internship programme also provides a social context where interns can receive feedback, guidance, and mentorship from experienced professionals. This social interaction allows interns to receive constructive criticism, learn from their mistakes, and refine their skills. Social learning theory highlights the importance of feedback and social reinforcement in the learning process, and internships provide an ideal environment for such interactions (McDonald & Wilson-Mah, 2022). Moreover, Anjum (2020) indicates that social learning theory emphasizes the role of self-efficacy in skills development. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to successfully perform a task. Through the observation and modelling of competent professionals in internship programmes, interns can develop a sense of self-efficacy in their skills and capabilities. This belief in their abilities can motivate them to further develop and apply their skills in future professional contexts. This theory has been significant in this study based on its ground and argument. Therefore, it has contributed to the achievement of the objectives of this study.

The subheading below focuses on the nexus between the internship programme and skills development. The study uses secondary reading materials from journal articles, conference papers, thesis, and academic dissertations to unpack the theme under concern.

**The Nexus Between Internship Programme and Skills Development**

The goal of the internship programme is to give graduates the practical knowledge needed to compete in the labour market (Martin, 2015). Both emerging and developed nations around the world use the internship programme (Aktas, Pitts, Richards & Silova, 2017). Considering the introduction of internship programme in many South African public institutions, this section seeks to discuss the relationship between the internship programme and skills development. In simple words, the researcher(s) wants to establish whether
internships have the potential to transfer a variety of skills to graduate interns. Having this in mind, with the help of internships, recent graduates can acquire the real-world work experience required to enter the workforce. An internship is also a programme designed to give recent and old graduates (between 18 and 35 years) the chance to put the work skills they have learned and will use in the future into practice (Supratpono, Samsudi, Sudan & RW, 2018; Clarke, 2018). Accordingly, the primary objective of internships is to ease graduates’ transfer from academic institutions to the workforce (Yusuf, Okanlawon & Metu, 2018). By assisting graduates in applying their theoretical knowledge in the real world, an effective internship should supplement the educational programme (Jackel, 2011). Interns get practical knowledge in their subjects of study through this procedure that they would not otherwise acquire through university or college study programmes. In this sense, internships can be recognised for their contribution to employability and skill development. Additionally, internships are commonly acknowledged for their value in gaining professional experience (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). Mabeba (2019) observed that during the internship programme, interns can learn professional skills like problem-solving, verbal communication, and conflict management. It is also believed that interns can form positive work habits and attitudes and learn how to use current information and communication technology and office supplies. Additionally, Thomas (2016); Velez & Giner (2015) asserted that internships foster collaborative skills in the sense that they teach interns a variety of abilities that cannot be taught in a traditional classroom setting. They gain the ability to adapt, make concessions, and work well with others. Their ability to come up with ideas, collaborate, and perform as a team will serve them well in the workplace of the future. Interns must remain goal-oriented during the internship time. They must learn how to manage their time effectively, because tasks are planned during activity-based learning sessions. They would not be able to survive in the professional job environment if they are unable to manage their time. Completing activities like writing reports, making presentations, keeping records, conducting observations, and other things may be part of an internship (Velez & Giner, 2015; Thomas, 2016). As much as this article is more concerned about the relationship between internships and skills development, according to (Johari & Bradshaw, 2008; Khâliî, 2015; Rothman & Sisman, 2016) internships serve as a good foundation for building and developing interns’ personalities because they teach them to be objective, increase their level of self-assurance, and ultimately motivate them.

Legislative Framework on Internship Programme and Skills Development in South Africa

The introduction of the internship programme in South Africa can be attributed to the enactment of the Skills Development Act in 1998. This act was implemented with the specific objective of tackling the skills shortage prevalent in the country and fostering the growth of a highly skilled workforce. Recognizing the importance of skills development in driving economic growth and social development, the act laid down a comprehensive framework for various initiatives aimed at enhancing skills acquisition and facilitating the transfer of knowledge (Skills Development Act, 1998). One key aspect of the Skills Development Act was the establishment of internships to bridge the gap between education and employment. Internships were recognized as valuable opportunities for graduates to gain practical work experience, apply their theoretical knowledge, and develop the necessary skills demanded by the job market (SDA, 1998). By incorporating internships within the broader framework of skills development, the act aimed to address the mismatch between the skills possessed by graduates and the skills demanded by employers (Helyer & Lee, 2014; Anjum, 2020). Lastly, the act emphasized the importance of internships in enhancing employment opportunities for graduates. It recognized that internships provide a platform for graduates to acquire industry-specific skills, develop workplace competencies, and improve their overall employability. By actively promoting internships as part of the skills development landscape, the act sought to create a more dynamic and responsive workforce, better equipped to meet the evolving needs of the labour market (SDA, 1998; Mabeba, 2019; Adeosun, Shittu & Owolabi, 2022).

Research and Methodology

To examine the relationship between internship programmes and skills development in the Department of Education, the Department of Provincial Treasury and the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture, this study employed a quantitative research approach. This approach was considered the most appropriate because addressing the research problem depended on the analysis of quantitative data collected on many survey questions. Moreover, a quantitative research approach was followed because the study was testing the causal relationship between internship programmes and skills development. The study was conducted in the three selected provincial departments in Limpopo Province of South Africa, namely, the Department of Education, the Department of Provincial Treasury and the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture. The target population in the study was the past and present interns in the abovementioned departments. The researcher(s) initially targeted hundred (100) of interns from the three departments. However due to reduced, only seventy-one (71) participants were sampled as a total sample size. The participants were sampled using a non-probability sampling technique. In this study, both primary and secondary data were collected. The primary data was collected through surveys. The researcher(s) has used semi-structured questionnaires to collect data from the past and present interns in the three departments. The secondary data was collected from different databases such as Google, Google Scholar, Scopus and universities repositories. In other words, literature was reviewed from published journal articles, dissertations, and other internet sources. The collected data were analysed using Microsoft Excel. The findings are presented in descriptive, table, percentage, and pie charts. To ensure the validity and reliability of this study, the researcher(s) consulted with a university statistician on the best method to achieve the aim of this study and no personal feelings were attached to this study. This study forms part of the master's dissertation which was completed in 2021. Ethical Clearance was issued by the University of Limpopo with ethical clearance no [TREC/207/2019] and gatekeeping was also granted by the three departments. The researcher(s) maintained all ethical integrity and consideration when fulfilling this study.
Empirical Results and Discussion

The section presents the empirical results and discussion thereafter. The participants were probed to complete the semi-structured questionnaires voluntarily. Participants of the study were both current and previous interns.

Demographical Information of the Participants

This section presents the demographical information of the seventy-one (71) participants, including their age, gender, and highest qualification level. Thus, the demographical information is essential in the study because the information helps the researcher(s) to understand the demographic characteristics of the target population and to ensure the reliability of the data collected. Table 1 below presents the findings from the respondents.

Table 1: Biographical Characteristics (n=71)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highest Qualification</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diploma/certificate</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate degree</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate degree</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Total   | 71       | 100%     |

Source: Compiled by the authors (2023)

From the analysis above in Table 1, it can be observed that the majority of participants (43%) are in the age range of 30-35, followed by the age group 25-30 (35%). The smallest proportion of participants falls within the age group 20-25 (22%). It is found that there is a slightly higher representation of females (57%) compared to males in the sample (43%). In addition, out of the 71 participants, 6% held a Diploma/certificate as their highest qualification, while the majority (75%) had an Undergraduate degree. Approximately 19% of the participants held a Postgraduate degree as their highest qualification.

Internship programme on developing the culture of working independently

A question asked in this section was whether the internship programme can influence the culture of working independently as an intern. The purpose of this question was to check whether the internship programme has indeed assisted the respondents to be able to work independently rather than always seeking help and mentorship. The findings for this question are presented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Internship programme on developing the culture of working independently; Source: Compiled by the author(s) (2023)

The findings in Figure 1 above indicate that the majority (60%) of the participants strongly agreed while a minority (40%) of them agreed that the internship programme helped them to develop a culture of working independently as an intern. Furthermore, 0% of the participants are not sure and those who strongly disagree and disagree were also recorded at 0%. In conclusion, the internship programme assisted participants to develop a culture of working independently. This is necessary in the sense that interns should have a sense of ownership of their daily work activities and able to act independently for their future endeavours. In this regard, it is clear that the internship programme as stated by Chen & Shen (2012) indicates that an intern's commitment positively influences overall satisfaction with internship experiences and often interns develop skills and experiences to able to work independently.
Internships on developing social interaction skills

The question to be answered in this section was whether the internship programme can help interns to develop social interaction skills. Social interaction skills are important in assisting interns to interact and liaise well with their colleagues. The purpose of this question was to check the impact of the internship programme on such skills. The findings for this section are presented below in Figure 2.

![Figure 2: Internship programme and social interaction skills; Source: Compiled by the author(s) (2023)](chart)

Based on the findings, 33% strongly agreed and 67% of the participants agreed. In addition, none of the participants indicated that they are not sure, including those who strongly disagree (0%) and disagree (0%). It can however be acknowledged that the internship programme helped participants to gain social interaction skills. These skills are necessary simply because they could make interns associate well with colleagues. For one to lead a happy and meaningful life in the work environment, one must learn how to effectively interact with others and the environment (Matson, 2018; Anjum, 2020). Looking at the impact of internship on assisting the respondents to develop social interaction skills, participants were then asked whether the internship programme helped them to develop social interaction skills and positive results were noted.

Internship programme on developing conflict management skills

The work environment has diverse cultures and sometimes there are conflicts among colleagues. A question was then probed to check whether participants may be able to learn how to deal with conflict in the workplace.

![Figure 3: Internship programme and conflict management skills; Source: Compiled by the author(s) (2023)](chart)

The participants were asked whether the internship programme helped them to deal effectively with conflict in the workplace. Based on the findings above in Figure 3, it is found that 22% of the participants strongly agreed and 57% agreed while 21% are not sure whether the internship programme had assisted. Again, 0% of the participants strongly disagreed and disagreed. Therefore, the internship programme played an important role in developing the intern's ability to deal effectively with conflict in the work environment. In this regard, it can be affirmed that indeed internship helps the new graduate to deal with many work-related issues such as conflict. Pilz (2016); Mesquita, Seabra, Fernandes, Abelha & Ferreira-Oliveira (2020); Jacob, Xiong, & Ye (2015) have shown that the common purpose of the internship programme is to give graduates workplace skills. Among other skills, interns must develop conflict management skills. Dealing with conflict requires one to have good problem-solving skills. It is also important because some of the respondents may be line managers in the future. Conflict management plays a very important role in workplaces.
to prevent conflicts and for the employees to concentrate on their work. Conflict management is essential because it helps to create a positive work environment, improve communication, and boost productivity (ALFRA, 2023).

**Internship programme on developing reporting skills**

The researcher sought to establish whether the internship programme could assist interns to develop reporting writing skills. Participants demonstrated their perceptions in the questionnaire and their responses are indicated below in Figure 4.

![Figure 4: Internship programme and reporting skills; Source: Compiled by author(s) (2023)](image)

The researcher(s) needed to understand whether the internship programme developed reporting skills among previous interns. The minority (45%) strongly agreed, and the majority (55%) agreed while those who are not sure, those who strongly disagreed and disagreed were recorded at 0%. Reporting skills are important in the work environment, and one has to know formal ways of presenting and reporting information either through documents or communication channels. It can however be concluded that the internship programme had developed the participants’ reporting skills. In this regard, professional abilities are essential if one wishes to advance in their job. These abilities include teamwork, creative and critical thinking, the ability to deal with ambiguity, moral judgment, and the willingness to take responsibility (Harvey, 2000; Andrews and Higson, 2008; Kalfa & Taksa, 2015; Moore & Morton, 2017; Clarke, 2018). Sometimes interns join their respective departments without knowing formal ways of reporting certain things to their line managers and other colleagues.

**Internship programme on improving interns’ ability to use the computer programme**

Interns can learn or acquire different skills during the internship programme. Amongst other skills, interns can learn different ways of using a computer programme such as Microsoft applications - Word, Excel and PowerPoint. The findings are presented below in Figure 5.

![Figure 5: Internship programme and Computer Literacy; Source: Compiled by author(s) (2023)](image)

The finding above in Figure 5 is in response to a question asked on whether the internship programme had the potential to improve interns' ability to use computer applications. The findings show that the minority (45%) strongly agreed, and the majority (55%) agreed. Participants who are not sure strongly disagreed and disagreed were recorded at 0%. In essence, the internship helped in improving previous interns' basic computer skills. Basic computer skills are of paramount importance especially if interns are following a career path which requires basic computer skills. Based on the empirical study conducted by Malapane and Mukonza (2023) mentors and interns acknowledged that the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) provided graduate interns with a variety of skills during the internship programme, including communication, computer, and office etiquette abilities. It is for this reason that the study argues that there is a solid consensus that through internship programmes interns can acquire or improve some of their computer skills depending on the nature of the duties they are carrying out daily.
Internship programme on developing time management skills

The researcher checked whether the previous and present interns developed time management skills during their internship programme. The question was important to understand deadline challenges and late coming among interns. The findings are discussed below.

Based on the above finding in Figure 6, the majority (60%) strongly agreed while the minority (40%) agreed. Furthermore, none of the participants were sure (0%) and for unknown reasons, none of the participants strongly disagreed (0%) and disagreed (0%). Therefore, it is clear that the internship programme had a positive impact in terms of assisting participants acquire time management skills. In closing, the study argues that time management must be part of one’s work ethic and as such one must have good time management skills in the context of the work environment. Equally, Viviers, Fouché and Reitsma (2016) consider time management as one of the professional skills. The above figure shows the results of how interns developed time management skills through the internship programme. Not only do interns start their internship programme with good time management skills but as time goes by, some manage to develop such skills.

The role of the internship programme in developing interns' communication skills

The impact of the internship programme on developing communication skills is important. The researcher(s) needed to understand the role of internship in such. The results are presented below in Figure 7.

The participants were asked whether the internship programme could assist them to develop communication skills such as reading, speaking, and writing in their respective departments. In that vein, it is found that 52% of participants strongly agreed, and 48% of participants agreed. Furthermore, none (0%) of the participants were not sure, strongly disagreed and disagreed. Therefore, the internship programme can help interns to develop communication skills. Literature has emphasized the importance of communication skills (Viviers, Fouché & Reitsma, 2016; Kevey, 2020). Having professional communication skills in the workplace is one of the important elements that each intern must develop. How interns communicate outside the workplace will differ from how they communicate in the workplace.

Summary of Results

The main aim of this study was to examine the nexus between internship programmes and skills development. Therefore, it is found that there is a positive relationship between skills development and internship programme. It is found that participants were able to acquire a diverse range of skills, such as communication, problem-solving, conflict management, reporting, social interaction, and basic computer skills.
Conclusions

This study intended to evaluate the relationship between internship programme and skills development. The study has successfully achieved its goal by conducting an empirical study in three selected government departments in Limpopo Province of South Africa. It is safe to conclude that there is a relationship between internship and skills development. To a particular extent, the internship programme played a significant role in transferring a variety of skills to interns. Among other skills, the internship has developed conflict management, time management, communication, problem-solving, teamwork, decision-making and listening skills. The study concludes by stating that the impact of the internship programme is not limited to the above-mentioned skills. There are other skills such as critical thinking which interns could gain from internships. Therefore, all these skills have implications for government departments and organisations. Because such skills are important for the growth and success of both public and private institutions.

Government departments can optimise internship programme to maximise skills development, by introducing rotational assignments as part of the internship programme to expose interns to different directorates or areas of the organisation. This would enable interns to gain a broader perspective of the organization’s operations, develop diverse skill sets, and understand the interdependencies between various functions. Drawing from this research, in future the researcher(s) may focus on the challenges faced by interns in government departments and maybe propose solutions. Second, researcher(s) may use mixed methods and consider other key informants (mentors of the interns and public officials in the human resources development unit) to give insights about internships.

Acknowledgement

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Collection, Formal Analysis, Writing—Original Draft Preparation, Writing—Review And Editing by authors with equal participation. All authors have read and agreed to the published the final version of the manuscript.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were obtained for this study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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