




The Impact of the Internship Programme on Students in A Selected Public Higher Institution in The Eastern Cape, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

It is important to note from the outset that the duty of preparing students for careers rests with the educational community. Internship before graduation appears to offer students experiential learning, better opportunities for employment and better knowledge of real work environments. The institutions benefit by obtaining more resources at a lower expense as well as a chance to assess whether the intern will fit in well with the team and the role. The majority of students graduate from university or college and struggle to find jobs due to lack of experience and exposure to the working environment. The study sought to assess the effect of internship on students in public institutions. The study used a qualitative research approach, through semi-structured interviews, and respondents were approached through purposive sampling technique. The results of the study show that internships are favourable to students, universities, organisations and result in more job offers and quicker employability of interns. It further states that internships involve some investigation into the characteristics of students who will be employed by institutions in future through internship programmes. Finally, the study revealed that internships provide better opportunities for graduates and unemployed students by exposing them to their chosen field, either in unpaid or paid internship programmes. The study recommends that universities must create more internships to ensure that students are equipped with skills and gain positive and required experience in field work.

KEYWORDS

Internship; students; higher institutions.

INTRODUCTION

The majority of students graduate from university or college and struggle to find jobs due to lack of experience and exposure to the working environment (Štetić & Šimičević, 2019). The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, under section 195(1)(h) states that the public sector must promote and support effective career development and Human Resource management. However, South African youth is still facing the issue of unemployment due to many challenges such as lack of skills and experience that is needed by employers. Consequently, this results in many youths or graduates not being employed and they resort to criminal activities even though they are educated. Lam and Xiao (2021) suggest that strategies or tactics and developmental programmes are needed in higher institutions to provide graduates with skills that are needed by employers. Due to external and internal factors that affect the employment sectors, initiatives that familiarise youth with changes and practical experience in the work environment are important (Spowart, 2019).

Hornig-Huey and Mojdeh (2019) regard internship as a component of career development and Human Resource management. Jourell and Sumanga (2022:45) define internship as “a form of experiential learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skills development in a professional setting”. Ismaela and Bawica (2019) add that a higher institution internship is a type of outside-the-classroom learning that provides students with training in different professions. Internships provide practical experience for both undergraduate and graduate students in their chosen field of study or a new field, whether in a paid or unpaid setting (Bukaliya, 2022). Many higher institutions allow students to work at an organization's site for a set number of hours, equivalent to the number of class hours, in exchange for academic credit (Narayanan & Fukami, 2022). However, this programme of internship has been developed and implemented by higher institutions as strategy to provide students with needed skills and experience, but it had not been formally evaluated. As such, research is needed in higher institutions to check the effectiveness of internship programmes on students. Therefore, this study sought to evaluate the impact of internship on students in public academic institutions. It will also provide the importance of internship programme to students and provide suitable recommendations to solve challenges faced by students regarding lack of skills and lack of experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Internships are viewed as a pillar of employability programmes by many governments and academic institutions around the world and, in some circumstances, they are required in order to graduate from higher academic institutions (Masood, 2021). Many experts agree that an internship is crucial for career advancement (Baert et al., 2021). A favoured way to combine academic learning with practical experience is through internships (Purnawan, Bagia, & Wayan, 2020). Internship is a life-changing experience where students are introduced from a learning environment to a new, professional environment (Frederick et al, 2022). These internships are

intended to improve students' academic performance, as well as their employability, once they graduate (Zegward & Hodges, 2021). Academic students can put their theoretical knowledge into practice by combining it with real-world job circumstances through internships (Pequeno & Sessions, 2020). Due to internship programmes, students can apply what they have learned in the classroom to real-world situations. Students need to take part in internships that are designed and managed in a way that target their career long-term objectives (Kayat & Abidin, 2019). These internship programmes help students to develop practical skills that enhance their understanding on issues pertinent to a particular job and improve their preparation for employment (Muhammad & Ali, 2022).

In order to improve students' employability in a competitive job market, university students need to strengthen their basic job knowledge and experience through internships (Parrot, 2019). There are various advantages for students who decide to take part in internships: Students have a better chance of landing a career, may obtain a full-time job offer from the companies that recruited them as interns, and gain experiences that may influence their career choice (Selden & Chan, 2020). According to Cho (2022:67) three distinct types of benefits exist for graduates: "(a) those related to the enhancement of employment opportunities, (b) those related to the development of skills and competencies, and (c) those related to the effects on career exploration". Interns are more likely to receive a better offer to continue working for the internship provider permanently (Daley, 2020). Students who take part in internships have a better chance for employment than those who did not participate in internship programmes (Miles, 2021).

Lown and Davis (2020) indicate that students' prospects of finding employment will be significantly increased once they have gained work experience through the internship programme. Interns normally gain more confidence, expertise and experience, after completing the internship programme (Wolcott, 2020). Internships provide students with the chance of choosing the area of interest in their field. Interns gain more exposure in the workplace through networking with experts in the field (Binder, 2018). The majority of students develop many skills during internships such as time management, multitasking, teamwork and communication skills (Shan, 2018). The above point is supported by the study of Wilton (2022) who states that internships help students to develop written and verbal communication abilities as well as teamwork, time management, inventiveness, technical skills and critical thinking. Internship expose students to general competencies and technical skills (Costa, Seabra, Melo, Brito, & Dias, 2020). Most South African first year students in higher institutions choose courses based on their matriculation marks, not their passion (D'Abate et al., 2021). Internships assist students to determine whether they want to work in the field they studied or change their profession. Students have a chance of obtaining better knowledge about the course in the practical part and start linking the class theory with the real world (Crossman, 2020).

Internships assist employers to develop new ideas that bring change to the workplace. Internship programmes also assist academic institutions to develop curricula that meet the

market labour requirements (Koyana et al., 2022). Academic communities obtain better information to align with the course content from the industry through the internship programme. Lecturers can then modify how they instruct and assist students in career training (Kahn & Louw, 2016). It also plays a crucial role in closing the skills gap and provides needed information about employment (Pietersen & Malatjie, 2020). Academic institutions provide courses that are relevant to the labour market because of internships. Students thus gain better prepared professional (Karunaratne et al., 2019). Internships create unique or better relationships between higher academic institution, students and market labour providers (Agarwal & Gupta, 2020). Market labour, in turn, acquires knowledge of the types of job seeker for future requirements. It assists students to identify their strengths and weaknesses in the workplace (Watts & Pickering, 2021). An important factor in student internship prepares interns to work as professionals. Students who participate in internship programmes learn new ideas and concepts that are not covered during lectures (Jackson, 2021). The study of Gill and Lashine (2018) revealed that peer mentoring and vertical integration in a project-based learning environment showed that the internship programmes improved students' academic performance. Brennan and Little (2020) conclude that internships reduce unemployment, especially for young people who lack required skills. According to Wilton (2022), the unemployment rate stands at 32.9% in 2022 from 33.56% in 2021, decreasing by 0,66%. Dennis (2017) indicates that the presidential Youth Employment Initiative played an important role in reducing youth unemployment in 2022.

However, Ailworth and Barret (2019) indicate a number of problems that have made it difficult for interns to learn in the workplace. According to the research of Al-Zhyri (2020), "inadequate guidance support, funds, and lack of enough time are the major challenges of the internship programme". For an internship programme to be successful, the contributions of the higher education faculties are crucial. Despite the fact that numerous studies highlight the challenges of internship programmes and its immediate advantages, there is a lack of knowledge regarding internships' long-term effects on career paths, especially its effect on academic higher institutions. There is thus a need for intensive studies on the effect of internship programmes on academic higher institutions. This study was conducted to ensure that institutions can better customise their internship programmes to suit the expectations of their students, the labour market and improve institutional curricula by having a deeper understanding of the elements that make an internship experience beneficial. It is in light of the above aforementioned information that this study evaluates the impact of internship programmes on students in higher academic institutions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilised a qualitative research approach, where data were gathered using interviews. The significance of using a qualitative approach was to gather what people know, think, observe and experience (Welman & Wilston, 2020). Interviews are important in qualitative method

since they assist to gain experience, meaning and perspectives from respondents (Denhardt & Draai, 2015). The researcher used qualitative method and interviews to gain rich information from experienced people with certain attributes. Further, the qualitative method was used by the researcher because it enables the researcher to record the experiences, opinions and attitudes of the interviewees and produces a narrative and descriptive account of a practice or setting through the use of techniques like participant observation and case studies.

The sample was drawn from one higher public institution which has deeper knowledge and experience about the internship programme. All ethical considerations were followed during the course of the study. Permission to conduct the study was requested from the affected institution through the high degree research committee. The clearance and gatekeepers' letter were issued to the researchers and permission was granted to conduct the study by both affected parties. A consent form was provided to the participants to sign before the data were collected and all details of the study and its implications were provided in the form. The participants were willing to participate voluntarily in the study and were informed that they were allowed to withdraw from participating at any time without any penalty. The privacy of participants was protected during the course of the study.

The data were collected using semi-structured interviews. The interviews were written in both IsiXhosa and English to accommodate all the respondents. Creswell (2013) describes how a researcher designs a semi-structured interview by mapping out the subjects to be addressed, controlling the conversation to guarantee coverage, and questioning for specific purposes. Using this technique assists researchers in approaching the study problems through many lenses and perspectives. A guide containing required topics and questions is utilised during semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are frequently employed by researchers who aim to properly comprehend the responses given and to delve deeply into a subject (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). In order to verify the information obtained from the participants, the researcher employed audio recorders during data collection. Thus, audio recordings provide unlimited replicability (Gunersel, 2019). Audio recordings serve several purposes for researchers: (a) it keeps data "fresh and true"; (b) it lessens the impact of transcription (loss of data due to flattening into two-dimensional text format); (c) it allows researchers to hear passion, intonation, pauses, and inflections throughout the analysis process; and (d) it lowers loss of context and risks of misrepresentation and transcription errors. The participants were interviewed due to the availability of tape record.

The participants were approached using purposive non-probability sampling strategy in this study to choose participants. The study focuses on seven interns, three mentors and three managers whose work description or job specification are employed on a daily basis, and they possess appropriate information on internship programmes. Purposive sampling involves the researcher choosing participants or locations that are most helpful in understanding the phenomenon. According to subject (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017:12) "Participant inclusion was determined by their ability to contribute to the research." The table below presents

demographic data for managers of businesses involved in internship programmes and coordinators of internship programmes in higher education.

Table 1.

Demographic data

Participants	Gender	Age	Occupation	Years of experience
Participant 1	Male	18-29	Co-ordinator	2 years
Participant 2	Female	40-49	Supervisor	10 years
Participant 3	Female	39-40	Co-ordinator	4 years
Participant 4	Female	39-40	Manager	5 years
Participant 5	Female	50 and above	Manager	More than 10 years
Participant 6	Male	40-49	Co-ordinator	10 years

Source: Authors' Own

Theory triangulation was used by examining the situation from multiple sources. The aim is to tackle the situation or phenomenon with different views, opinions and perspectives, with different questions in mind. According to Creswell (2013:40), "The different theories or hypothesis do not have to be similar to or compatible; in fact, the more divergent they are, the more likely are to identify different issues or concerns". The researcher was honest and truthful to avoid bias, since the sample was directly selected. A Thematic approach was used to analyse the data. Thematic analysis is a suitable and effective technique to apply while attempting to comprehend a group of experiences, ideas, or actions within a data collection (Lokot, 2021). Thematic analysis is driven more by the objectives of the research than by a desire to use a straightforward analytical technique. This approach was employed since it is suitable to provide in-depth information on was gathered through interpretation. According to Mayring (2018), thematic analysis provides an opportunity for the data to be presented more widely.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Respondents were probed about their participation in the internship programme. It has been discovered that mentors, interns and line managers have better knowledge of the internship programme that takes place in their campuses since they are directly involved. This implies that the respondents who participated in this study were more aware about the processes of the internship programmes. One participant defined internship as a job that is given to inexperienced people on a short-term basis to gain experience in a specific field. Parker and Adedokun (2020, p. 50) explain, "Internship as a short-term job for interns to get introductory experience". The study revealed many effects of internship on students in higher education. Internships contribute to students in terms of assisting with family finances, to cover tuition fees, including other expenses. It helps students to gain valuable work experience.

One participant indicated: “... *Internship assists a lot in experience regardless of the variation. The internship may be in many terms, take place in summer or winter, paid or unpaid and full time or part-time. All internships contribute a lot to students’ work experience*”. Another participant added: “*All internships are worthwhile for work experience, let’s face it*”.

The majority of students eagerly accept internships to gain experience since internships come up with amazing perks. Singh and Abbey (2022) state that the main goal for internships programmes is to create work experience and employability for the youth. Students get a chance to see what is happening and how it feels to work in the fields they choose in college or university. Internship give students something they cannot get in textbooks or in a lecture hall. Vélez and Giner (2019) assert that internship is crucial in balancing the class theory and practical application of the content. In answer to the question, “What ways do internship programmes help you to advance your careers?” Many students think that they have chosen the right career because of what they learned in class, and internship brings different perspectives to students when they are actually on the job. Students gain more knowledge about their field and how it feels to do the job. This indicates that students get a chance to know if they will enjoy working in the field of their choice or whether they should change it. One of the participants indicated:

“Internships assist students to get enough credits for the college or university. Students perform better in class after practicals since some do not understand the theory but understand better during the practicals and start balancing or recalling the theory in classroom during practicals”.

Many students talked about the benefits of being able to apply the knowledge they learned in class to their internship jobs. Internships contribute to students’ university credits for graduation purposes. Marks and Chillas (2022) state that some students obtain better marks in practicals and that assists in balancing the marks of the theory and practical for graduation. One intern interviewed stated:

“Internships or placement assisted me to boost my marks for graduation and better performance. For instance, I got 40% in theory which is not good, and I got 60% through placement, that assisted to get 50% as final marks, so I was able to graduate”.

During internship students’ network with bosses and many workers that open many doors of potential opportunities for employment. There is no better instrument to impress the employer than practicals which determine what you are capable of. Some interns get permanent jobs in the place where they first served as an intern. Students gain experience that prepares them for the workforce, making them desirable candidates for jobs when they graduate. Internship assists interns or students to know more about companies that are hiring in the same field (Mart & Ching, 2021). Green et al., (2020) add that employers are able to select the best candidate for a certain position through internship programmes, while other interns receive letters of recommendation from co-workers or bosses for other jobs because of internship.

The participants answered the question, “What particular skills do you usually acquire from internships, in your opinion?” They indicated that there are numerous skills students learned or acquired during the internship programme. The placement provided students with language, interpersonal and communication skills, skills which are mostly developed during placement only. Interns gain maturity and confidence after their placement and feel ready for the workplace. Student interns also gain an ability to solve problems, time management skills and a sense of responsibility. Through internships, students can learn about many career routes in the private or public sector and receive experience in multiple roles. Personal growth is one of the benefits that was mentioned.

One participant stated: *“I leaned many skills during my internship which include flexibility, management skills, attitude, complaint handling, courteousness, customer service and leadership. Students supplement their classroom theory with practical, hands-on skills from internships.”*

This indicates that students learn more skills during practicals. Rompelman and Vries (2020) state that students learn many generic and specific skills in industry that cannot be offered in the classroom. Internship is not only based on what students benefit, but organisations also gain from student participation. During the interviews, one of the participants mentioned a few benefits, such as being proactive, assisting colleagues and being a good team player. Leadership is one of the important qualities that is needed from candidates for certain jobs (Hurst, 2019). The study revealed that students have a chance to lead smaller groups during their placement or they may be led by mentors. Internships can give students feedback that can be used to inform their future educational and professional endeavours.

A student intern mentioned different traits of a leader they learn:

“...I learned many attributes about a leader, to mention, few motivations, teaching, hardworking, encouraging, coaching, supervision, and caring. Internship provided me with a greater understanding of the subject we are studying, and stronger practical abilities are advantageous to higher education institutions.”

Wasanthi and Thilakerathne (2020) mention some leadership characteristics in the workplace, which include efficient, responsible, hardworking and attention to work details. Diana (2019) adds that personal qualities are part of leadership traits such as being patient, courteous, calm, open minded, having confidence, being smart and organised. Internships improve the likelihood of obtaining work following graduation, as the study of Michael (2020) revealed that about 58% of those who did internships received job offers right away, compared to 30% of those who had solely academic instruction. Interns are perceived as people with better entry-level for employment. According to a thorough analysis of evaluations of internship programmes, internships increase graduates' employability and generate greater wages (Mala, Akash, & Jewel, 2021).

One of the participants stated:

“Majority of employers chose to hire interns over non-interns, because Interns were associated with the idea that they took initiative and were dedicated in producing high-quality work. Companies are exposed to new talent from tertiary educational institutions through internship programs. Organisations gain from the fresh perspectives, ideas, and methods that interns bring to the table. Hiring interns is an affordable way for businesses to support workforce development.”

The above point was supported by human capital theory as it predicts that interns should earn more money as a result of their increased competence abilities and knowledge. The study conducted by Kahn and Louw (2016) shows that the experience of internship improved the likelihood of finding full-time work by 15%. The study revealed that, two years after graduation, the experience from student internships raised wages in the majority of employees who were interns. Similarly, Miles (2021) found that, over three to five years, interns in a US-based programme made 17% more money than individuals who were not interns. Internships should therefore be seen as a gateway to the job market. In essence, the internship programme helps to reduce youth unemployment by preparing recent graduates for jobs that call for a respectable amount of experience. In other instances, an internship is regarded as a chance to gain "hands-on learning experience" that is not possible in the classroom since real-world problems need putting theory into practice. The above information was based on the question, "In what ways do internships help students find employment after graduation?"

During internships, businesses evaluate possible future employees to hire, which lowers recruitment expenses. When used effectively, interns help with jobs and projects, which increases productivity. Businesses gain from the extra staff and new enthusiasm that interns provide. The most recent academic information and abilities from higher education institutions are brought by interns during practicals.

Another participant added: *“Businesses gain from the interchange of academic ideas and practical implementations, which promotes lifelong learning. Companies use internship programmes as a talent pipeline to find and develop future employees. Internships that are successful can result in shortened full-time job searches”*.

Through employment of new interns from different backgrounds, internship programmes support businesses' efforts to promote diversity and inclusion. Businesses may access a wider range of talent, which promotes an inclusive work environment. Interaction with interns raises employee engagement levels across all departments within organizations. Opportunities for mentorship foster a healthy work atmosphere and advance the careers of both current employees and interns. In addition, a company's brand is more visible when it hosts interns from respectable universities (O'Connor & Bodicoat, 2016).

Knowledge of new technology and industry trends is frequently brought by interns into the curriculum of the programme of academic modules. Higher institutions gain by remaining competitive and informed about developments in the private sector. The participants were

asked what the contribution of internship was to academic programmes, one of the participants stated:

“By creating a feedback loop, internship programmes are guaranteed to be in line with the changing demands of the business. Businesses support efforts in higher education and help shape the future generation of professionals. Internship programmes create good reputations for students, lecturers and the university”.

A high degree of adaptability and a desire to learn are frequently brought by internship to students when they are back from field work. Higher institutions gain from interns' general adaptability and willingness to take on new challenges. Higher education institutions can maintain their academic curricula's relevance to industry demands by implementing internship programmes.

One interviewed participant indicated:

“The practical knowledge acquired through internships contributes to curriculum updates and modifications in academic settings. Internship programmes cultivate and reinforce collaborations between universities and business sectors. Partnerships with businesses open doors for cooperative projects, research, and other endeavours that enhance the institution's reputation”.

Another participant added:

“Higher education institutions' accreditation and quality assurance procedures benefit from internship programmes. Positive company comments and successful placements raise the institution's profile among the academic community. Higher education institutions' overall success measures are influenced by a high percentage of internship placements and student success stories”.

Good results reaffirm the institution's dedication to the employability and success of its students. Establishments of strong internship programmes have an advantage in attracting students. When selecting higher education institutions, prospective students frequently take industry links and internship possibilities into account. Based on input from the industry, universities can improve their curricula to better suit changing demands. Higher education institutions' reputations and global recognition are enhanced by internship programmes. Higher education establishments have a reputation for turning out graduates that are not only qualified academically but also professionally. Internship programmes attract external funding from the government, and private sponsors. The institution's projects attract funding as a result of the success internship programmes (Wright & Mulvey, 2021).

However, a few challenges that were encountered by students during internship were mentioned. When colleagues are too busy, student interns struggle to seek advice. Some interns feel neglected when they cannot get the assistance or clarification they need. Students find it challenging to adapt to the language that is used in workplace. There is a lack of support from management and supervisors. The internship is not permanent, and often, after six months or two years, those who were interns become unemployed again.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has briefly x-rayed the effects of internship on students, higher institutions and organisations where students are placed. Students learn many skills during internship programmes such as communication, technical skills and leadership skills. Most students gain employment after internship programmes, and some are paid higher salaries due to the experience they gain during placement. Some students face challenges during their placement when senior staff members are busy, and internships must be regarded as an employment gateway. For the ultimate goal of facilitating the personal and professional development of all student interns, colleges and universities will need to find a way to guarantee that such qualified mentors are available, whether through screening procedures or by providing training programmes for intern mentorship.

The placement of students needs to be compulsory in all qualifications or departments to ensure employability, balance of knowledge and skills development in students. The internship must target the unemployed and unfunded post-graduate students in the institutions to overcome financial challenges during their studies. The institution policies should develop students' skills to ensure that all students undergo internship programmes for experience purposes. National, Provincial and Local government need to provide more budget to higher institutions to ensure that the internship programme continues and thrives.

Limitations and future research

The study was limited to one public higher institution in specific departments, which are Hospitality and Public relations management departments. The two institutions and these departments were chosen because they always hire interns every year. The main aim is to ensure that the students are properly prepared to face the labour market. The sample of this study was limited to Sixteen respondents, thus future research can replicate the research to a larger population and in private institutions with diverse samples. This research used qualitative research approach, so future research can use mixed method or a purely quantitative research approach to conduct the study.

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