

Local Government Internship and Youth Graduate Employability: Perspectives of Interns, Mentors and HR Managers

Zethembe Mseleku

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9175-1130>

University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

mseleku111@gmail.com

Abstract

In this article, I explore the relationship between the internship programme and the prospects for youth graduate employability as perceived by interns, mentors and HR managers. Unemployment, particularly youth graduate unemployment, is a major development problem. It is worrying that unemployment continues to grow despite major interventions. Among other interventions to overcome youth graduate unemployment was an internship programme established to provide graduates with work experience meant to improve their employability. However, it remains controversial whether graduate internship increases employability prospects of the youth. In this article, I seek to solve this puzzle. A total of 50 semi-structured interviews were conducted with graduate interns and staff members of the eThekweni Municipality in South Africa to elicit data. The results indicate that internship is not always the key to employability and youth graduates often require more than just internship experience to secure employment. In this article, I therefore recommend better internship planning and development. This could improve the role of the internship in graduates' transition to employment.

Keywords: education; employability; graduates; internship; unemployment; youth

Introduction

Youth graduate unemployment has become an overwhelming concern to government and policymakers across the world (Longe 2017). This challenge is severe in developing countries characterised by poor economic growth (Adesola et al. 2017). Although graduate unemployment has been deemed overestimated in South Africa (Graham, Williams, and Chisoro 2019; Van Broekhuizen and Van der Berg 2016), it is a demonstrable major socio-economic problem (Ampong 2020; Van Broekhuizen 2016). Graduate unemployment has increased alongside the overall general unemployment over the past decades (Harry, Chinyamurindi, and Mjoli 2018). The rise of graduate unemployment is highly evident particularly among black youths, and mostly those who graduated from humanities and social sciences (Baldry 2016).

Youth graduate unemployment has therefore received substantial attention from stakeholders, including government, private sector entities, and civil society organisations (Asmare and Mulatie 2014; Graham, Williams, and Chisoro 2019). Notably, these stakeholders' attention is drawn particularly to education–job mismatch and other causes of graduate unemployment (Aminu 2019). Accordingly, a lot has been done to overcome youth unemployment in general. Interventions included supporting micro and small enterprises (Matthew et al. 2020), entrepreneurship (Diraditsile and Maphula 2018; Kumar and Raj 2019), and education, particularly through investments in higher education (Bhorat, Cassim, and Tseng 2016; Caroleo and Pastore 2017).

Despite these interventions, graduate unemployment persists. According to Asmare and Mulatie (2014, 46), “graduate unemployment, particularly in urban areas has been a persistent concern for politicians and policy makers since the 1960s”. This concern is justifiable since graduate unemployment jeopardises not only the economy. Literature suggests that graduate unemployment is a new pressing development issue that leads to various other socio-economic issues. For instance, a relationship between unemployment, poverty and inequality is evident in South Africa and worldwide (Nattrass 2002). Because of unemployment, youths are vulnerable to crime, drug abuse and risky sexual behaviour in South Africa. These issues constitute a major assault on humanity and therefore undermine development in South Africa (Mago 2014).

Although graduate unemployment is attributed to various factors, including the lack of jobs due to economic factors (Adesola et al. 2017; Cairns, Growiec, and De Almeida Alves 2014; Dagume and Gyekye 2016), the lack of work experience among new graduates has been identified as one of the leading causes (Balwanz 2012; Kapareliotis, Voutsina, and Patsiotis 2019; Nattrass 2002). The internship programme was therefore adopted as a possible solution for graduate unemployment. The term “internship” has been widely used in different contexts and its common meaning has been established in existing literature. Internship generally refers to “a short-term practical work experience in which students receive training and gain experience in a specific field or career area of their interest” (Zopiatis 2007, 65). Internships are designed and desired to ensure the smooth transition of graduates from higher learning

institutions to the workplace (Kapareliotis, Voutsina, and Patsiotis 2019). In the era of graduate unemployment, the role of the internship is doubtful. In this study, the term “internship” is used to refer to a two-year municipal internship programme offered by the eThekweni Municipality.

The role of internship in employability has been widely studied with most studies examining the internship integrated into the higher educational curriculum (Blackwell et al. 2001; Fuchadzi 2016; Yusuf, Okanlawon, and Metu 2018) and transition from internship to employment (Akomolafe and Adegun 2009; Baron-Puda 2017; Jamil et al. 2012; Supraptono et al. 2018). The scope of scientific enquiry in this area has not been broadened to explore the role of local government internship on graduate employability. Previous studies have ignored integrating the diverse perspectives of key actors into the internship programme. The purpose of this article is therefore to explore the role of local government internship on youth graduate employability by examining the combination of perspectives of interns, mentors and human resource (HR) managers. I deal with two critical questions in this article. The first question is whether local government internship provides employability skills, knowledge and experience to graduates. The second question is whether the internship experience empowers youth graduates to transition smoothly from education to the labour market. The rest of this article is structured as follows: The next section covers the literature review that examines relevant empirical evidence and sets the theoretical framework for this research. This section is then followed by the research methodology. The results are then presented in the third section. Finally, there is a discussion of the findings, conclusion and recommendations.

Literature Review

Graduate Unemployment as a Development Problem

Graduate unemployment has increasingly been recognised as a global pressing development problem (Adesola et al. 2017; Akiri, Okunakpo, and Anebi-Atede 2016; Gebisa and Etana 2019; Tengku Kamarul Bahrim et al. 2019). Graduate unemployment calls for major attention as research evidence suggest that graduates normally take more than six months after graduation to secure their first jobs (Bai 2006; Bartlett and Uvalić 2019). For example, Bai (2006) found that China has a lot in common with other world countries regarding the problem of graduate unemployment. In China, graduate unemployment is related to economic stagnation, demand and oversupply of graduates, economic and education reforms (Bai 2006). Similarly, Sharma and Apte (1976) argued that graduate unemployment is grounded in mainly three factors, namely, a mismatch between skills and labour market demands, an oversupply of graduates for certain fields, and the irrelevant education system. It is therefore critical for governments and other relevant stakeholders to redress these underlying issues to overcome graduate unemployment.

In South Africa, the rate of unemployment among young people is double that of the unemployment among adults (Altman 2003). This increase comes with the increase in the number of graduates in South Africa over the past few years as evident in the Stats SA report (Nonyana and Njuho 2018, 1):

The number of graduates with degrees or diplomas has increased by 21% between 2010 and 2014 (from 153 000 to 185 000). During the same period, Stats SA recorded an increase of 109 000 in the number of unemployed people with a tertiary qualification.

This scenario is similar to that of other developing economies. Clearly, the demand and supply of graduates in South Africa is not matched, which result in the growing graduate unemployment. Graduate unemployment has major socio-economic implications. In South Africa, the steady increase of unemployment among young people has been associated with crime, drug and substance abuse, and risky sexual behaviour (Du Toit 2003; Mago 2014; Small and Obioha 2014). This evidence suggests the pressing need to redress unemployment, particularly graduate unemployment among youths.

Graduate Employability

The notion of “graduate employability” has been discussed in the literature. According to Mason, Williams and Cranmer (2009), employability depends generally on individuals’ capabilities that help them become self-sufficiently in the labour market to realise their potential through sustainable employment. Employability is based on skills which graduates need to develop for their careers and those that are required for personal development over time (Andrews and Higson 2008). However, most graduates lack employability skills and are at risk of unemployment (Wang and Tsai 2014).

Based on employers’ perspectives, more should be done to develop students’ wider skills and attributes, including teamwork, communication, leadership, critical thinking, and problem-solving (Lowden et al. 2011). Such skills and attributes will enable graduates to transition easily to work. In addition, the notion of graduate employability emphasises the importance of soft and technical skills that graduates need to cope in the work environment. These skills include, but are not limited to, communication, numeracy, information technology and learning how to learn at a higher level (Mason, Williams, and Cranmer 2009). In the study of employability skills initiatives in higher education, Mason, Williams and Cranmer (2009) recommended the provision of these skills in the higher education institutions and that they be included on the curricula. It was discovered that key skills, career guidance and work experience programmes should be considered in higher education agenda to improve graduate employability (Mason, Williams, and Cranmer 2009).

Internship and Work Experience

The extent to which internship work experience determines new graduate employability is discussed in the literature. Internship programmes have undoubtedly provided an option to acquire work experience for new graduates (Cerulli-Harms 2017; Dinira and

Natalia 2018; Jamil et al. 2012; Kharchenko et al. 2020). A study conducted in the United States (US) found that 60 per cent of internships turned into job offers from the host organisations (Zhao and Liden 2011). Despite the internship success in the US, it is not always the case that internship experience translates into graduate employment. This suggests that more should be done beyond internships to increase graduates' opportunities for employment. An internship serves as a work experience opportunity for graduates to get exposure to hands-on work that relates to their qualifications (Akomolafe and Adegun 2009). According to Suprptono et al. (2018), internships play a significant role in matching the competences of students with the needs of the industry. Even though the role of internship may be doubtful, Blackwell et al. (2001) argued that there is a strong correlation between work experience and graduates' ability to find employment and earn a reasonable income.

Correspondingly, academics also believe that students should be exposed to internships or work experience regardless of their field of study (Yusuf, Okanlawon, and Metu 2018). Generally, work experience for graduates is a positive learning experience which often leads to job placement (Blackwell et al. 2001). Internships might provide graduates with lifetime technical skills that can be transferred from one entity to another. This programme plays an integral role as it contributes to professional development (Arcidiacono 2014). Although internships have improved the university–work transition, it has been recognised that this programme does not always guarantee a job placement. As argued by Harms (2015), most interns are less likely to find employment in their first year of internship. It is therefore still controversial whether internships directly lead to graduate employment.

Work Readiness

In this article, the concept of “work readiness” is used to explain the relationship between local government internship and youth graduate employability. “Work readiness refers to one’s certain skills, knowledge and attributes that contribute to their employability, and enable them to be ready for and successful in the work environment” (Cabellero and Walker 2010, 17). Graduates’ work readiness has therefore become important to graduates, employers and even universities with important emphasis placed on developing graduates’ capabilities (Priksat, Kumar, and Nankervis 2019). Also, the expectation that higher learning institutions produce graduates that are work-ready is of major interest (Priksat, Kumar, and Nankervis 2019).

The concept of work readiness has also been used to understand the transition of graduates from higher education to industry employment. In this instance, the attention of policymakers has been drawn towards the role of work-ready graduates as a human capital for social and economic development (Caballero, Walker, and Fuller-Tyszkiewicz 2011; Tomlinson 2017). Graduate work readiness is the extent to which graduates are perceived to possess the skills and attributes that render them prepared for success in the workplace (Borg and Scott-Young 2020; Cabellero and Walker 2010; Spanjaard, Hall, and Stegemann 2018). A graduate is therefore considered work-ready

if they can transition smoothly from education to work after graduation given their skills and competences to secure employment (Borg and Scott-Young 2020; Cabellero and Walker 2010; Spanjaard, Hall, and Stegemann 2018). According to Borg and Scott-Young (2020), the important first step in one's career is initially transitioning from education to work; hence attention should be given to work readiness. This important aspect of career development has often been overlooked in the literature with the main focus on career during work.

In this article, the lenses of work readiness, namely, skills, knowledge, capabilities, experience and competences are used to explain the relationship between internship and employability. The work readiness concept is useful in explaining interns' or graduates' readiness for employment after they have completed an internship programme. In this article, I therefore contextualise internship at work readiness perspective to explain the extent to which youth graduates get prepared for employment through internship exposure. As far as I know, no other study considered the unified approach to use the work readiness concept to explain the relationship between internship, work experience and employability. The three combined perspectives have been a missing piece of this analytical approach on the existing literature.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study and a total of 50 semi-structured interviews were conducted with graduate interns, their mentors and HR staff members. The selection of participants was based on a purposive sampling. The sample included current graduate interns (aged 18–35 years), the mentors for interns (aged 18 years and above), and HR managers (aged 18 years and above) in the eThekweni Municipality. In this regard, 30 interviews were conducted with interns, 15 interviews with their mentors, and 5 interviews with HR managers in an attempt to have diverse views on the issues under investigation. A data analysis was done through a “thematic analysis”, conducted with the help of NVivo software.

Results

The eThekweni Municipality internship, known as a work experience programme, is offered for two years, and most interns interviewed were in their second year. All mentors and HR managers interviewed had more than five years working for the municipality and were involved in the internship programme for at least five years in mentorship, coordination of the programme and recruitment of graduates.

In this study, the interns were asked about the probability to secure employment during or after their internship. They were also asked about the role of internship in their transition to employment. Given their experiences in working with interns and their knowledge on the likelihood of their interns to secure employment, the mentors' insights were crucial to provide a snapshot on graduate interns' employability and if this was the direct outcome of the internship experience. Similarly, the HR managers reported on

the opportunity for graduate interns to be employed based on their experience and knowledge of recruitment.

This study found inconsistency on perspectives reported by the participants regarding the role of internship on youth graduate employability. The general premise of the internship programme is that graduates require work experience to access employment. Although the participants' perspectives indicate the significant role of internship, little evidence suggests that internship translates into graduates' employability at a local government level.

Although some interns reported positively that the skills, knowledge and experience they receive from the internship would help them to secure employment, more than half of the interns responded negatively. The negative responses indicated doubt and a lack of confidence in skills, knowledge and work experience developed through the internship programme. When asked if she thinks the internship will help her to find a job, participant 19 stated:

I do not know neh; I do not think so hey. I do not think the programme itself will help me to get a job because what I have realised is that most of the things within the municipality, I mean the training they provide is just based on the municipality. So, it means if you want the job, you have to be employed in the municipality because the training was structured in that way. So, I cannot be doing an internship here and wanting to work in the private sector where the training is not in line. So, probably it will help me to get the job in the municipality, but elsewhere, I do not think so.

In this response, this participant highlighted the limitations of the training provided which develops limited skills. This is a major shortfall of the local government internship. Another intern reported that although the internship places her in a better position compared to graduates with no form of work experience, she is doubtful considering the lack of experience in what is offered through the internship:

I am not sure because when you look at jobs that are available, posts advertised for Community Development, they normally look for people with relevant intensive experience, and what we are getting here is only a small portion of what is required. So, I feel like it is not going to help me that much in finding a job. What we do is just only a small portion of what I see required for most jobs being advertised. So, with this experience from the internship, I doubt we become competitive for real jobs. Yeah, we do not do a lot of things in detail. I feel like we are just doing something anyone can do even without a Community Development qualification or degree. You know in that department, they just took whoever to do what I do. I know someone who has done marketing and someone else who has done geography which is too irrelevant. (Participant 9)

Correspondingly, most mentors expressed what they observed regarding the employment of their graduate interns during or after the internship programme. Although this observed challenge may not apply to all mentors, this study found that

most mentors reported that interns normally struggle to secure employment despite their internship experience. For instance, participant 33 reported the following:

You know that my first graduate intern has never been unemployed; it has been over 10 years. For others it has been over 5 years or 6 years and so on. They are still struggling to get employment. Well, others are lucky because they get employment before they even complete the 2-year internship programme. I would therefore say, it is 50/50% chance for my interns to get employment or remain unemployed. The reason for some to struggle to find jobs is not them or the programme, but it is a countrywide problem of unemployment. Seriously, there is lack of employment in South Africa in general because even those graduates who end up getting jobs, they struggle before they get such jobs. The programme is fine; if we were to consider this 2-year experience, they would get employed, but now there is lack of employment. Hence, some are still unemployed despite having completed the internship programme.

Another mentor interviewed indicated that there are few interns who secured employment during the programme or immediately after the programme. When responding, participant 38 made the following remarks:

I must say that most of my interns complete the programme without getting employed. It is a bit of a struggle for them to get employment even after they have completed the programme. The problem is that unemployment is just a nationwide problem. So, they may have experience but still struggle to get employed because there are limited job opportunities. Only a few interns manage to secure a job within the 2 years of the internship programme, which is not a good sign. I think the programme is fine, and the interns are competent enough for permanent jobs, yet the problem is that there are limited jobs available which they all compete for. Some really few, say in 2 years, they get permanent jobs immediately after completing the programme. Few, maybe 1/10, get a permanent job during the programme. Whereas, a lot take time to get jobs after the programme. I also know a number of graduates who have struggle for a long time to get employment despite the fact that they have completed the programme.

The HR staff members interviewed on graduate employability painted a similar picture of the likelihood of graduate interns to secure jobs in or outside the municipality. Similar to mentors, most HR staff members expressed that despite the work experience graduates might have accumulated during the internship programme, they are not guaranteed permanent employment. The following remarks by the HR manager further indicate that graduates may still struggle to secure employment despite their internship experience:

The skills, knowledge, and experience they acquire from the programme is useful as they will qualify for entry-level posts. For instance, the grade 5 to grade 7 posts mostly require applicants to have 2 years or even less than 2 years of experience in a relevant environment. So, interns stand a better chance to get the entry-level posts even though this is not guaranteed for everyone. Also, as you may imagine, interns will be given priority when filling these posts because they have been part of the municipality for some time. Unfortunately, jobs are limited. (Participant 44)

Based on the HR perspective, the internship programme does provide skills, knowledge and experience when preparing graduates for employment. However, this does not guarantee interns' access to employment. Although it is expected that when interns leave the programme, whether completed or not, they leave for employment, the report from the academy suggests that this is not always the case. When interviewed, participant 50 who works at the academy and also serves as a mentor to some graduate interns reported:

You know, as an academy we are supposed to do the monitoring and evaluation of the programme, but I realised this is still a setback. For instance, there are so many interns who leave the programme in the municipality, some after they completed it, others during the programme. These interns leave the programme for various reasons which they report on the evaluation they do or on the exit interview. Even though some leave when they get employment, some leave because the contract ended with no job to do after. Others even decide to go back to school because they know they do not have a job after the internship. So, it is just obvious that the jobs are not guaranteed for our interns.

There is therefore a lack of conclusive evidence which suggests that internship translates into employment of graduates. Although there are several graduates who secure employment during or after internship, there is no clear indication if this results directly from their internship experience. As evident in these results, most interns reported the lack of confidence in their skills, knowledge and experience and whether it would be useful to secure employment. Similarly, mentors reported concerns that most of their interns struggle to secure employment after internship. From the HR perspective, it was indicated that, mainly owing to limited jobs in the labour market, employment of graduates is not guaranteed.

Discussion

The article draws from the perspectives of interns, mentors and HR managers to analyse the role of the internship programme on youth graduate employability. In line with the previous studies (Adesola et al. 2017; Cairns, Growiec, and De Almeida Alves 2014; Dagume and Gyekye 2016), this study demonstrates that graduate unemployment is partially due to the lack of jobs in the labour market. The findings indicate that despite qualifications and work experience gathered through internship programmes, youths may remain vulnerable to unemployment as labour demand in the job market is a deciding factor. The key finding from this study is that graduates struggle to secure employment despite their internship experience. Whereas interns attribute unemployment to the lack of skills, job knowledge and the relevant experience despite having undergone an internship, mentors and HR managers partially attribute unemployment to the lack of jobs.

This study finding is consistent with the results of the previous studies which recognises the role of internship on employability, particularly when preparing graduates for the workplace (Cerulli-Harms 2017; Dinira and Natalia 2018; Kharchenko et al. 2020).

However, little evidence suggests that internship translates into graduates' employability. Whereas interns generally assessed the internship negatively, mentors and HR managers generally assessed the internship positively. Interns attributed low probability of securing employment to a lack of skills, knowledge and relevant experience despite the internship. Nevertheless, the perspectives of mentors and HR managers attributed graduate unemployment despite internship experience to the lack of jobs in the labour market. These contrasting perspectives open a new area of debate regarding the nature of unemployment of experienced youth graduates.

Previous studies which showed the relationship between internship and employability (for example the study by Akomolafe and Adegun (2009)) reported that employers and business organisations normally provide employment opportunities to 70 per cent of their interns. This present study demonstrated that although graduates may acquire work experience from an internship, it does not necessarily guarantee employment. The results therefore suggest that it is not merely the work experience which determines employability. Rather, the quality, relevancy and length of the experience are important factors determining the role of the internship on employability. The availability of jobs in the marketplace cannot be overlooked as evident from the perspectives of the mentors and the HR managers.

Using the work readiness concept (Cabellero and Walker 2010; Prikshat, Kumar, and Nankervis 2019), this study presents the extent to which local government internship contributes to graduate preparedness for jobs. A successful internship should make graduates work-ready; that is, it should contribute to their capacity development for employment. However, this study indicates that the degree to which the municipal internship programme provides graduates with work experience is questionable despite that the programme is believed to provide some level of work experience to graduates. The internship is questionable because evidence also shows that some graduates do not necessarily acquire experience, skills and knowledge for work readiness from the programme. For instance, some interns perform tasks not related to their qualifications. Inadequate experience and lack of skills despite participation in the internship programme undermine graduate work readiness and employability. This is one possible explanation for graduates' difficulties to secure employment even with their internship experience. The local government internship itself therefore does not adequately empower youth graduates with skills, job knowledge and work experience that ensure employability. This evidence therefore suggests that the internship needs some improvement, particularly with regard to the placement of graduates into relevant departments.

Conclusion

This study investigated the role of local government internships on youth graduate employability. Although internships play some significant role in the professional development of graduates, this study found no clear relationship between graduate internships and employment opportunities for graduates. The skills, knowledge and

experience that could contribute to work readiness of graduates are reported lacking in the current internship programme of the eThekweni Municipality. It was also reported that even after acquiring work experience through the internship, most graduates struggle to secure employment. Better planning for the internship programme could therefore improve its effectiveness in preparing graduates for the world of work.

Recommendations

I recommend the formulation of a national internship policy which provides a framework for graduate internship programmes. Monitoring and evaluation systems that are in line with the internship policy are also recommended to improve the efficiency of internship programmes. This study only relied on the data from semi-structured interviews to determine the role of internship on employability, which have limitations. It is therefore recommended that a mixed-methods or quantitative study be conducted in this area to generate more comprehensive results. Further research that is aimed at understanding the nature of experienced graduate unemployment at a larger scale is recommended.

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