



Research Article

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Local Government Internship: Opportunity or Exploitation?

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Despite the evident increasing unemployment rates, particularly youth unemployment, the South Africa's graduate labour force continues to grow. Recent studies show the devastating figures of graduate unemployment which grow alongside the overall unemployment rates in South Africa. Undoubtedly, unemployment mostly affects young graduates who recently graduated from higher learning institutions. Thus, internships are increasingly recognised as a bridge through which graduates can transition from higher learning institutions to the labour market. However, whether internships are good or bad for young graduates remains a debatable question. Therefore, this paper is drawn from the perspectives of young graduate interns to determine whether internship presents real opportunities for career development of young graduates or it is merely used as an exploitative tool by employers. This study adopted a qualitative approach where a total of thirty graduate interns from eThekweni Municipality participated in the semi-structured face-to-face interviews. The results indicate that most graduate interns viewed the local government internship programme as exploitative. Further results show that graduate interns are generally underpaid yet overworked in the local government internship. Workplace abuse and the lack of access to resources were reported as major challenges faced by graduate interns. These results symbolise the exploitative nature of internship programmes at the local government level. Therefore, this paper recommends appropriate systems, policies, and workplace rules to improve local government internships.

Keywords: Exploitation, Graduates, Internship, Local government, Stipend, Unemployment, Youth**1. Introduction**

On the 9th of February 2023, the South African President Cyril Ramaphosa delivered the State of the Nation Address (SoNA). In his address, he highlighted unemployment as one of the pressing development issues which are of policy concern in South Africa. South Africa recorded a 33.9% official unemployment rate in the third quarter of 2022 (Statistics South Africa, 2022). These figures are not surprising because South Africa's official unemployment rate has constantly increased in the past two decades. Accordingly, youth unemployment continues to be a key challenge in South Africa. This is despite the major improvements in access to education opportunities for the majority of South Africans (Mseleku, 2022). Based on the recent statistical reports, youth unemployment rate increased up to 66.5% in the year 2022 (Statistics South Africa, 2022). This evidence suggest that youth remain

disadvantaged in the South Africa's labour market. This is particularly true as youth unemployment rate almost doubles adult unemployment rate in South Africa.

Studies have been conducted to determine the nature of youth unemployment in many countries. Undoubtedly, youth are at the receiving end of unemployment. If not unemployed, they are generally underemployed, on short term employment or on dangerous jobs (Camba, 2020). Evidence indicates that poor macroeconomic performance is one of the factors which makes it difficult for youth to secure employment. Also, youth generally lack work experience (Görlich, Stepanok & Al-Hussami, 2013; Qayyum & Siddiqui, 2007). This challenge does not only make youth vulnerable to unemployment, but it also makes them vulnerable to retrenchment. In times of crises, young inexperienced people will be the first to lose their jobs (Görlich, Stepanok & Al-Hussami, 2013). A study conducted by Hasan & Sasana (2020) on the determinants of youth unemployment rates in Asean countries suggest that factors such as lower gross domestic product, lower foreign direct investment and high inflation have a negative influence on youth employment. These factors have a direct link with the economic performance of individual countries. Thus, countries with lower economic growth, such as South Africa, are characterised by high levels of youth unemployment rates. It is therefore safe to conclude that youth unemployment, particularly in developing countries like South Africa, reflects the failure of economy to meet the labour force supply.

Education is not only viewed as a powerful driver for economic growth, but it is also seen as weapon which individuals can use to uplift themselves socially, politically, and economically (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021; Nazimuddin, 2015; Rindermann, 2008; Wang & Liu, 2016). This is in line with the remarks of the former South African President Nelson Mandela who once said, "education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world". His remarks remain a motivation for many to pursue education. In light of the increasing graduate unemployment, however, some have questioned the worth of pursuing education. In South Africa, unemployment affects both the educated and the uneducated. The graduate unemployment rate among those aged 15-24 years declined from 40,3% to 32,6%, while it increased to 22,4% for those aged 25-34 years in the first quarter of 2022 (Statistics South Africa, 2022). Clearly, young graduates are also disadvantaged in the labour market despite their education. However, a closer analysis of the education to employment statistics shows that education is still valuable because the graduate unemployment rate remains relatively low when compared with the general youth unemployment rate.

Studies have been conducted to determine the nature of graduate unemployment in many countries. For instance, a study that was conducted by Mseleku (2022) on youth graduate unemployment in South Africa revealed that graduate unemployment was due to multidimensional factors which include restricted labour market, skills mismatch, and lack of work experience among young graduates. Due to unemployment, graduates also resort to low-level jobs while others explore the opportunities to further enhance their knowledge and skills (Abd Rahman, Ismail, Ridzuan & Abd Samad, 2020). Questions have been asked regarding the relevancy of education qualifications of graduates. Accordingly, studies conducted by Aminu (2019) and Kadir, Naghavi and Subramaniam (2020) discovered that graduate unemployment is partly due to skills mismatch. In this regard, graduates possess skills that do not meet the needs of the labour market. During the SoNA, the South African president Cyril Ramaphosa indicated that employers should not require work experience for entry-level jobs. However, recent evidence shows that most employers in South Africa demand work experience even for entry-level jobs, a factor which excludes a lot of new graduates from the labour market (Mseleku, 2022). To equip graduates with the required work experience, graduate internships are becoming very popular in South Africa and beyond (Hunt & Scott, 2020). The pressing need to address youth graduate unemployment can never be overemphasised. Thus, diverse strategies have been implemented by the government and other stakeholders to address this growing development problem, one of which is graduate internship programmes. Whether graduate internships are good or bad remains a debatable question, and this paper attempts to address this puzzle. This paper therefore addresses the following objectives: (1) To explore whether graduates perceive the internship programme as an opportunity or a form of exploitation. (2) To explore the lived experiences of

graduates in the internship programme. The rest of this paper is organised as follows: The next section covers the critical analysis of the existing relevant literature on the subject under study. The third section discusses the qualitative methodological approach adopted to execute this study. Thereafter, the fourth section presents the empirical evidence addressing the objectives of this research. The paper concludes with a critical discussion of the major results, overall conclusion, and recommendations.

2. Graduate Unemployment

Unemployment among the South African graduates has been steadily increasing over the past years despite the growth in the graduate labour force (Mseleku, 2022; Oluwajodu et al., 2015). Graduate unemployment is among the pressing socio-economic issues in South Africa. Mcayi (2016) stated that the issue of graduate unemployment undermines not only the economic development of the country, but it is also detrimental to the country's social development. It is even more critical to young people, including young graduates. As evident in the literature, most young people in South Africa are struggling to secure employment post-graduation (Mseleku, 2022). Efforts have been made to overcome graduate unemployment with approaches such as internships programmes, particularly for young graduates. This is informed by the growing body of literature which suggests that younger graduates are likely to be unemployed than older graduates, where older graduates refer to those individuals older than 35 years (Altbeker & Storme, 2013; Monteiro et al., 2022). Moreover, most discussions on graduate unemployment in South Africa revolved around skills mismatch problem. The majority claims that graduate unemployment increases because they lack competences that match the requirements needed in the labour market (Mseleku, 2022; Van Broekhuizen & Van der Berg, 2016). There is also growing evidence which shows that graduate unemployment in South Africa is due to the lack of relevant work experience, a phenomenon which gave birth to internships, including those offered by local government (Graham et al., 2019). While our research does not focus on graduate unemployment per se, it draws a link between graduate unemployment and the exploitative nature of internships, with a specific focus at the local government level.

Graduate unemployment is the most alarming issue in both developed and developing countries, South Africa included. Government institutions and private organizations are addressing this challenge by initiating graduate internship programmes to provide work experience to newly graduated students (Tamrat, 2022). These internship programmes are designed to close the gap between theory and practice (Tamrat, 2022). Recent research shows the shocking rates of graduate unemployment which grow alongside the overall unemployment rates in South Africa (Mseleku, 2022; World Bank, 2017). In today's changing world, securing employment, particularly for new graduates, is a tough task. There is certainly no doubt about increasing competition for limited jobs in the labour market. Balancing graduate output and access to the labour market continues to be a major policy concern in many countries, South Africa included (Mseleku, 2022). Hence, internships are becoming even more prominent to facilitate transition from higher learning institutions to the labour market. However, particularly the value of the local government internships to young graduates remains debatable.

3. Youth Graduate Unemployment

Based on statistics South Africa (2022), the number of unemployed young people in South Africa increased up to 66.5% in the first quarter of the year 2022. Youth unemployment refers to a cohort of young members of society who are willing to work but unable to find employment due to a variety of political economy or structural factors (Okafor, 2011). South Africa recorded 33.9% official unemployment rate in the second quarter of the year 2022 (Statistics South Africa, 2022). Based on the recently released statistics, graduate unemployment is 10.6% (Statistics South Africa, 2023). However, the rate of youth graduate unemployment is slightly higher compared to the overall

graduate unemployment rate. Petrosky-Nadeau & Zhang (2021) concur that unemployment is the major threat to the economy in many countries across the world. Various reasons have been cited behind the increasing graduate unemployment. While some studies have blamed government for failing to create opportunities for young graduates (see for example, Qubati & Tsammim, 2021), other studies have found lack of skills and lack of relevant work experience as factors impeding young graduates to access the labour market (see for example, Mseleku 2022). Thus, youth graduate unemployment can be attributed to various factors.

In the South African context, young people are highly vulnerable to unemployment; they are deemed the most vulnerable group in the labour market (Writer, 2021). It is therefore not surprising that youth unemployment is seen as a key policy concern in South Africa, a problem that should be treated as a national emergency (Writer, 2021). In the current era of South Africa, youth unemployment is a major assault on humanity (Writer, 2021). This is despite the massification of higher education which is meant to provide young people, in particular, with employability skills (Osthuisen, 2021). Higher education is considered key for employability (Oosthuizen 2021); however, given the increasing graduate unemployment in South Africa, education alone is not a drastic solution to unemployment (Statistics South Africa, 2022). Compared to adults, young people are more vulnerable to unemployment partly due to lack of work experience (Levinsohn, 2014). It is therefore due to the lack of work experience and other reasons that graduates are pushed to consider paid and unpaid internship jobs to acquire skills needed in the labour market.

4. Effectiveness of Graduate Internship Programme

The decreasing number of graduates entering the labour force is due to the lack of experience and competences that match the requirements needed in the labour market. For this purpose, various stakeholders in different sectors support the internship programmes to increase the number of graduates entering the labour force. Internship programmes are known for bridging the gap between higher education and the industry. They facilitate the transition of graduates from higher learning institutions to the labour market (Mseleku, 2022). While some internships last for two years or more, most internship programmes are offered on short-term bases, generally for the duration of six to twelve months (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2017). The primary aim of internship is to provide graduates with hands on work experience which is important to secure employment (Chambers, 2015; Mabeba, 2019; Mcayi, 2016; Mchunu & Mutereko, 2020; Vélez & Giner, 2015). Thus, it is unsurprising that internships are now widely accepted as a mechanism which helps unexperienced graduates to access the labour market (Mchunu & Mutereko, 2020).

5. Internship and Graduate Employability

The notion of “employability” is widely debated in the literature. In light of the growing graduate unemployment, however, more research is required in this area (Hooley, 2017). This is why this concept should be understood as it encompasses the employed, unemployed, currently employed, future employees, labour market, and employers (Pheko & Molefhe, 2017). In simple terms, the notion of employability includes the capabilities for one to secure employment (Jeswani, 2016; Phago & Thwala, 2015). Clarke (2017) presents employability in three stages of education. These stages include (1) the preparation for employment, (2) the transfer of a student from education to employment, and (3) the remaining of graduates in employment and their continuous trend towards building up knowledge in a career (Clarke, 2017). It also extends beyond gaining employment, it is more about developing attributes to help graduates secure employment within an accepted field (Clarke, 2017). Employability encompasses the skills and knowledge gained by graduates which makes them employable. This paper addresses a very crucial question of whether local government internship enhances the employability of graduates, or it is merely an exploration tool.

Previous research shows that internships programme contributions towards the students'

personal and professional training and development (Prikshat et al., 2019). Moreover, these internships are usually endorsed as the valuable means of enhancing graduate employability (O'Connor & Bodicoat, 2017). Graduate employability is an important issue for higher education as the global financial crisis has led to a significant decline in the employment prospects of new graduates over the past few years (Sarkar et al., 2016). While internships provide work experience opportunities to graduates, they are characterised by numerous challenges. These challenges include poor mentorship, inadequate work exposure and exploitation (Mchunu & Mutereko, 2020). In this paper, we go deeper into the issues which undermines the quality of internship programmes drawing from the case study of local government internship.

6. Value of Local Government Internship

The major increase in youth graduate unemployment rate in South Africa and in other countries has led to the increase in the number of graduate internship programmes. Evidently, graduate internships are very popular in South Africa and in other countries; they are considered crucial for the transitioning of graduates from higher education institutions to the labour market (De Lannoy et al., 2018). A study by Yusuf, Okanlawon & Metu (2018) supports the notion that the main goal of internships is to facilitate the transition of graduates from education institutions to the workplace. Through the internship programme, interns gain knowledge and skills that are crucial for work productivity (Yusuf et al., 2018).

Most university programmes do not offer practical training; they are theory-focused. Through the internship opportunity, graduates acquire skills through practical learning where they translate their theoretical knowledge into practice (Willis, 2018). Willis (2018) further stated that graduates gain work experience from the internship, which increases their likelihood for employment. Thus, people who have been through an internship programme become more self-assured, skilled, and experienced (Willis, 2018). The benefits of the internship programme are mutual to interns and employers. In this regard, graduates acquire practical work experience and skills while employers enjoy the opportunity to assess their future potential employees from interns (Koyana & Mason, 2018; Mavundla, 2016). Under normal circumstances, interns tend to network with experts in different fields of work; they get exposure to the working environment; and they learn new skills, such as time management, and teamwork (Mabiza et al., 2017; Motene, 2017; Sleaf & Reed, 2006). It is therefore well documented that internships have mutual benefits to interns and employers. We have since decided to explore if this is the case with the local government internship.

7. Exploitative Nature of Internships

As much as the internship programme has a lot of benefits and advantages, it also has disadvantages and has been criticized for being exploitative. For instance, unpaid internships are used mostly as an approach by some employers to elude labour costs in an effort to maximize company profit (Gardner, 2011). Correspondingly, one of the most significant setbacks is that after working as an intern for a certain period, a graduate may not find employment after completing the internship programme (Mseleku, 2019). This status of unemployment is very demoralizing for a graduate, as can be the case when income is lost. In a statement issued by the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) (NYDA, 2014), it was highlighted that interns are not provided with adequate opportunities to learn because they receive basic administrative work instead of work that would improve their skills base and relevant working experience.

The enhancement of employability is a prominent purpose of the internship, and as such, the employment requirements must be known and understood. In the 21st century, the 4IR has changed the world of work considerably (Gathongo, 2021). The rising utilization of interns in the Kenyan labour market performing the same or significantly similar work performed by full-time employees in host institutions is troubling (Gathongo, 2021). The increase has led to the exploitation and

vulnerability of interns in workplaces. On many occasions, their vulnerability is connected to the argument that there exists no employment relationship between the host institution and the intern (Gathongo, 2021). This results in decreased protections of their employment as well as the underpayment of the salaries of interns in instances where they perform the same or similar work or work of equal value to that performed by full-time employees. Good internship arrangement seeks to provide an intern with a chance to experience the real world of work not to disguise the true nature of work relationship to secure cheap labour (Mabeba, 2019). Perhaps the most inspiring argument for investigating the impact of the internship programme on skills development is the fact that sometimes interns are not necessarily satisfied with the nature of duties they are expected to perform during work hours, particularly in public institutions (Mabeba, 2021). Amongst other things, interns find discomfort about making tea for their colleagues and sometimes making copies (Mabeba, 2021). As a result, sometimes interns see the programme as something that does not add value to their professionalism and self-improvement (Mabeba, 2021). This paper further unpacks these often-overlooked challenges in internships by drawing from the in-depth insights of graduate interns in the local government environment.

8. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach to elicit the in-depth insights regarding the local government internship programme in relation to youth graduate employment. The purpose was to explore whether internship is a genuine graduate employability opportunity or it is an exploitative tool for employers. Thus, the study drawn from the experiences and perspectives of young graduate interns pertaining the nature of local government internship.

To elicit qualitative data, a total of thirty face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with recent graduates who are part of the eThekweni Municipal internship programme. The participants were graduates of five South African universities including the Durban University of Technology (DUT), Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), University of South Africa (UNISA), University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and the University of Zululand (UNIZULU). It is very important to note that the sample consisted of graduates from these institutions because they are largely represented in the internship programme of the eThekweni Municipality. This is reasonable as all these institutions, except for UNISA which offers distance learning, are based in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province, where eThekweni Municipality is located. eThekweni Municipal internship programme was used as a case study because it is the largest 2-year internship programme in KZN.

Since this is a qualitative study which aimed to generate in-depth insights regarding the phenomenon under study, a non-probability purposive/judgemental sampling technique was adopted to select thirty graduate interns from the programme. Since interns were hosted in different units of the municipality, units were visited as a way of building rapport with potential participants. In addition, engagements were made with the eThekweni Municipal Academy (EMA) and the Human Resources to gain insights about the internship programme and the interns in the municipality. Rapport and detailed information about the programme were crucial in the judgemental selection of participants with knowledge and experiences about the programme. The database of graduate interns with their details was provided by EMA. This became an important resource in the communication and recruitment of potential participants. Only graduates aged 18 to 35 years were selected to participate in the study. These are referred to as “youth graduates” in the context of this study. Only graduate interns who had completed at least one year of the internship were included in the study sample. Arrangements were made to schedule semi-structured interviews with those who shown interest in the study. All interviews were conducted face-to-face at the participants’ preferred location, for example, in the boardroom of the municipal departments. Guided by the interview guide, participants were asked the open-ended questions and probing questions were also asked if needed. The interviews lasted between thirty and sixty minutes.

This research complied with the standard ethics requirements, and ethical issues such as

confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation. All ethical issues were discussed with participants beforehand, and participants were asked to sign the informed consent form if they agree to participate. The study was reviewed and found ethically sound by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee with protocol reference number: HSS/1307/017D.

All interviews were voice recorded given the consent of participants. To enable analysis, voice recordings of interviews were transcribed into descriptive raw data on the word documents. Since thirty interviews were conducted, a total of thirty interview transcripts were available for analysis. The study adopted a thematic analysis which was facilitated through NVivo 12 data analysis software. Through thematic analysis, patterns in the dataset were forged and themes emerged. The process of data analysis followed the six stages of thematic analysis proposed by Braun & Clark (2015). The stages were followed in sequence as follows: (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating codes, (3) constructing themes, (4) reviewing potential themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report.

9. Results

Thematic analysis was conducted to identify key themes that emerged from data collected through interviews. Thus, results of this study are presented in this section across six themes which include the perceived value of internship, perspectives on the remuneration for interns, the workload of graduate interns, workplace abuse, mentorship and support for interns and work resources.

9.1 The perceived value of the internship

The question of who significantly benefits from the internship has received attention from various stakeholders. While internship is believed to be of value to interns, there is an alternative view which suggests that internship is more beneficial to employers. This phenomenon was explored further in this study with a specific reference to the local government internship. Although the local government internship was recognised for its role in providing work experience to graduates, its value to interns is, however, reportedly undermined by irrelevancy of the internship itself. In this regard, most graduate interns reported lack of satisfaction regarding the contribution of internship to their work experience, skills, knowledge, and competences. For instance, one intern expressed the following:

"I am not happy with my roles; when I wake up, I ask myself as to what difference will it make. It is just the matter of being present in the workplace, but it is not helping me that much. Somehow, I do learn from the programme, it is just that most of the things I do here do not relate to my qualifications" (Intern D).

A good internship should ideally provide opportunities for career and professional development to graduate interns. The value of the local government internship was assessed by interns on the basis of work experience, skills and knowledge it provides. Reflecting on the value of the internship, another participant stated that:

"Well, I don't know about others in other departments. I mean it is expected as we are here that we will learn, get some experience and skills. To be honest, we do get some soft skills like communication skills. But is that enough? The answer is no. The problem with the way this internship is designed is that we are placed in departments where we do work that is not relevant to what we studied, and besides, we only perform activities of administrators. So, I don't think the programme benefits interns as supposed to be" (Intern F).

Clearly, the in-depth insight from graduate interns suggests that although they do benefit some skills and knowledge, such benefits are not substantive, particularly to enable their transition from

internship programme to full-time employment. In this regard, one participant expressed the following:

"I have been applying ever since, but I have never been considered for any job that I applied for in the municipality. I think there is no preference for graduate interns to permanent jobs within the municipality itself. So, it is very difficult to say the internship is beneficial even though I feel like I got some experience" (Intern B).

Therefore, in terms of the benefits or value of the internship programme, graduate interns assessed the internship negatively overall. We also explored the benefits or value of internship to the municipality, and evidence suggests that the internship programme is valuable to the municipality as graduate interns perform valuable activities of the municipality as reported by Intern K:

"My role is more of being the link between the city and external stakeholders. Meaning, I play a role within the city, and I also play a role within external stakeholders. So, I am able to interact with people from outside the city, and I am able to interact with people within the city itself. Before any project is approved, they have to establish a Project Steering Committee of which must have meetings every month, and we have these meetings every month; I organise these meetings every month" (Intern K).

Data also indicates that graduate interns are competent, and they perform tasks with weight equivalent to that of permanently employed municipal employees. This is evident in the remarks of Intern G who stated that:

"Look, the internship benefits the individual departments where interns are hosted. So, it obviously benefits the whole municipality. But let me talk about my department. I think that as interns we brought skills and knowledge which helped the department to perform its functions. Some of us do serious work that should be done by permanent employees. So, credit should be given to us for the work we do for the municipality" (Intern G).

While it is always expected that internship will benefit graduate interns through skills development, provision of relevant work experience and opportunities for professional development, evidence suggests that graduate interns add value to their host departments and the municipality at large. This thus explains the value of education in the labour market.

9.2 Perspectives on the remuneration for interns

The remuneration of interns has been a subject of debate. While some internship programmes are unpaid, other internship programmes are underpaid. A relatively few internship programmes in South Africa are well-paid. Thus, whether interns should be unpaid or better compensated remains a controversial topic. This study deems "being underpaid" as one of the signs of exploitation in the work environment. Therefore, this study explored the perspectives of graduate interns regarding remuneration to determine whether the local government internship is exploitative. Disturbingly, all graduate interns reported being underpaid, thus viewed the programme as exploitive in nature. Intern E, for instance, reported that the stipend earned by interns is extremely low as indicated below:

"The stipend is very small; I cannot afford my basic needs and, that creates a lot of stress for me such that when I am stressed, I cannot perform well. There is nothing that motivates me and, the fact that I cannot afford most of my basic needs is discouraging. You know back home they know that I am doing something in the municipality, and they expect me to support my family, but now how if the stipend is too little. Imagine now I cannot support my family, and that makes me stressed, and when I am stressed, it is very difficult to concentrate on my work and perform well" (Intern E).

From the above response, low pay does not only make graduate interns feel exploited, but it also

undermines their work productivity. Stress attributed to unaffordability of basic needs due to poor work compensation is believed to reduce work performance. It is evident that feeling being exploited due to the lower stipend demotivates interns at work. Corresponding insights were also reported by many other interns who felt that they were underpaid.

"I feel like stipend is not enough for the fact that we get burnt in the sun, like for me on Tuesday, I was doing call logging, and I got burnt in the sun and, this R3 600 is not enough, to be honest. Every time I get burnt in the sun, I ask myself that is this even worth it; it is discouraging and negatively impacts on my performance. If I was working for at least R8 000, I would not mind working in the sun because I would cover most of the things I need and still be able to save money, yet with R3 600, I cannot even save" (Intern L).

Working under difficult conditions and performing important city duties should be fairly compensated as remarked above. On average, the graduate interns who participated in this study earned R3 600. They believed they deserved a better pay and viewed low pay as a symbol of exploitation in the local government internship context.

All interns indicated that they are currently underpaid, and they should be paid better given the perceived value they add to the municipality. When asked if they should be paid better, Intern I indicated the following:

"Yes, because, as we are in the programme, we must wake up every day and come to work, and without payment, we cannot be able to go to work. Sometimes we need to attend classes for training, but that is impossible without money. We need money to pay for transport and other needs. So, we deserve a better pay" (Intern I).

Another participant expressed the similar perspective as indicated below:

"Yes, interns should be paid better because they must travel, they must eat, and they have other basic needs to meet. Some interns do not have money to do things to increase their access to employment. For an example, to get a drivers licence needs money, and a stipend can be useful in this case. Most people got their drivers licences through stipend. The stipend is not enough because I have so many needs and, I cannot afford most of what I wish to afford" (Intern J).

As evidence shows, the level of stipend is an important factor for analysis in research exploring the exploitative nature of the local government internship phenomenon. Although graduate interns in the context of this study are paid, they reported being underpaid, which is perceived as a form of exploitation. This was reported as a factor which also undermines the productivity of interns. All interns indicated that they deserved a better pay in accordance with the value they add to the municipality.

9.3 The workload of graduate interns

This study also explored the workload of graduate interns. To determine whether local government internship presents an opportunity or exploitation, it was of great interest to explore if interns were given a fair workload that is manageable but valuable. While adequate workload is important for interns to acquire knowledge, skills, and necessary experience, too much workload can be difficult for interns to handle. Most interns interviewed in this study reported workload as a challenge. For instance, one participant alluded to the following sentiments:

"The first challenge is overload; there is too much work. However, the work is manageable, but it is unreasonable for someone who is an intern because at the end you find that someone on a permanent position responsible for work ends up not doing their work. So, other staff members just push their work to you because you are an intern" (Intern C).

Based on the above remarks, what leads to work overload of interns is to take the work responsibilities of permanent staff members. This practice is perceived as one form of exploitation as interns often feel overworked as a result. Interns interviewed in this study had a strong view that they are treated unfairly in terms of workload as expressed by Intern J below:

"The way I see it so far, I feel like the interns do everything for their coordinators. Interns do everything and, you ask yourself as to what coordinators are doing then in their offices. The interns do everything in a project and then inform the coordinator that I have done this and done this. So, what exactly is done by the coordinators? We are not getting enough support as interns. We just do everything coordinators should be doing" (Intern H).

One can argue that performing the duties of someone and never getting compensated for such is unfair. This challenge was reported by many interns as a problem which leads to overload. Seemingly, some permanently employed staff members of the municipality unfairly allocated their work to interns. This is one factor suggesting the exploitative nature of the local government internship programme.

9.4 Workplace abuse

This research had a special interest to explore the way interns are treated in the work environment. In this study, interns reported ill-treatment by permanently employed colleagues. Most interns felt like assistants to their colleagues, felt disrespected by colleagues, and others felt emotionally abused. One participant reported that they are not treated like staff members:

"I feel treated like a PA, not only by my mentor, but also by other staff members in the office. They seem not to understand that we are also professionals who deserve to be treated with respect. Some do not even take us seriously. The second problem is being undermined because you are an intern. I think that need to be addressed, and we also need to be treated like staff members" (Intern A).

Unfair treatment in the workplace is a major assault on humanity. For interns, such treatment does not only discourage them, but it also undermines their potential to gain necessary knowledge, skills, and experience. Being overlooked by colleagues was also reported as a concern by most interns as also expressed by Intern B below:

"The major challenge I face as an intern is more of being undermined. Some people do not believe in your capabilities because they will be like ooohh no this is an intern. I think this is the most troubling problem for interns" (Intern B).

Being overlooked is associated with discrimination in the workplace. In this regard, some interns were deemed incapable of performing some activities. As remarked by one participant below, being overlooked can restrict the work exposure of interns and thus deny them opportunities for learning.

"It would be better if interns were to be treated equally like permanently employed staff members. I do not think interns are treated with respect here. Even the work they give us is not given respect. So, they make you feel that you are an intern, and you will not last beyond the two-year contract in the municipality. So, yeah, it is very difficult" (Intern P).

While only a few interns reported being given what they perceive as undignified activities such as making copies and coffee for the permanently employed members of the municipality, most interns reported ill-treatment in the workplace. Among other issues, interns reported being disrespected, undermined in their potential and being discriminated.

9.5 Mentorship and support for interns

Proper mentorship and support for interns are crucial aspects of the successful internship. Interns were also asked about the mentorship and support they receive. Disappointingly, interns in this study assessed the mentorship and support poorly as indicated below:

"I cannot say I am happy with the level of support; it is not adequate because when we came here, we were allocated to groups with mentors, but now you find that some mentors are not willing to assist or guide interns" (Intern A).

Without proper mentorship and support, interns are likely to experience challenges which undermine their ability to learn and benefit from the internship.

9.6 Work resources

Linked to poor mentorship and lack of support is the issue of unavailability of work resources. While it is always expected that the local government will have necessary work resources, interns reported the unavailability of resources as a challenge. For instance, most interns did not have laptops which they can use if working outside the office as indicated below:

"What I see as a problem is the lack of resources. Look, we are auditors, and sometimes we do not work inside the office. We also work with stakeholders outside the office, and it is very difficult to cope outside without a laptop. Maybe they must buy us laptops so that we do not struggle when required to meet clients outside the office" (Intern R).

While desktop computers perform the same functions as laptop computers, it is true that one cannot work with the desktop outside the office. Thus, the challenge reported by most interns in this study becomes a key concern. Another key challenge reported by interns is the lack of access to the internet and telephones as evident in the following remarks:

"More support is needed in terms of improving access to resources. For instance, the access to internet is very limited. This needs to be improved; I should be able to access a lot of information through the internet. Remember, as interns, we are here to learn. Also, our work sometimes needs that we make external calls, and in the municipality, we can only make internal calls. They must open telephone lines for interns" (Intern N).

Resources such as internet access are very important for research purposes. In their work activities, interns are also required to do research. Research is very important for them to enhance their knowledge base regarding the projects and programmes they are involved in. Without access to reliable internet, their work becomes difficult. Similarly, access to telephones enables better liaison with stakeholders. Thus, the interns' concern over access to these resources is reasonable.

10. Discussion

There is a growing body of literature suggesting that internships are increasingly recognized for their role in facilitating the transition of inexperienced graduates from higher learning institutions to the labour market (De Lannoy et al., 2018; Yusuf, 2018). Internships present opportunities for experiential learning whereby graduates can apply and practise their skills in a professional setting while gaining career and life experiences. This study explored the notion of the local government internship, whether it is a work experience opportunity or a form of exploitation for South African graduates. Participants interviewed in this study expressed their opinions and their experiences regarding the internship programme in different dimensions.

The degree to which the local government internship programme provides interns with relevant

work experience is questionable despite the fact that this programme is designed to provide relevant work experience to graduates. Unlike the previous studies which showed that internships provided interns with skills required for employment (Mavundla, 2016; Willis, 2018). The results of this study are disappointing with evidence suggesting that most graduates do not certainly acquire relevant work experience from the programme as expected. This challenge is attributed to the irrelevancy of the internship itself as interns reportedly perform tasks which are not related to their qualifications, the basic administrative work, for example. The main goal of an internship is to facilitate the transition of graduates from education institutions to the labour market (De Lannoy et al., 2018). This study suggest that the internship programme needs to make some changes regarding the placement of graduate interns into relevant departments which matches their qualifications. Mabiza et al., (2017) also recaps that graduate internship programmes have a propensity to further develop graduates in their disciplines. This means that interns will be able to grow and advance their skills and knowledge within their respective departments and fields. Such improvements within the municipality will result in a successful internship which will provide graduates with relevant work experience.

Surprisingly, our findings also revealed that some interns ended up performing duties that were supposed to be done by coordinators or permanent staff. These findings complement the findings of the previous study by Gathongo (2021) who discovered that there is a rising utilization of interns in the Kenyan labour market performing the same work performed by full-time employees in the host institutions, and such has led to the exploitation of interns in workplaces. It can be suggested that much still needs to be done in order to consolidate the internship programme with the aim of providing the necessary skills and relevant work experiences to graduates around the country. This study also brought forward the challenge of the stipend that revolves around the internship programme. It appears that in terms of remuneration, interns are underpaid given the duties they are expected to perform under difficult conditions. This is another factor showing the exploitative nature of the local government internship programme. Most interns are not necessarily satisfied with the monthly stipend, as some have to spend it on transport costs, groceries, paying rent and other basic needs. The findings further revealed that some interns use their stipends to support their families. Clearly, the current remuneration for interns within the local government is inadequate. Unfair remuneration, as also evident in the previous studies (for example, Gardner, 2011), was discovered as a key feature of exploitation in the local government internship.

Therefore, the results of this study suggest that institutions should reconsider adjusting the stipend considering the cost of living and public institutions should not run an internship programme just for formality purposes. The internship programme must be objective in nature. Failure to address the internship-related challenges will continue to negatively compromise the main objective of the internship programme. The results also show that interns are mistreated by staff members, including their mentors. The results also reveal that interns are disrespected because they are “interns” and not treated equally like permanent staff members. Additionally, the study results show that most interns are overloaded with work that should be done by permanent employees. This is also another form of exploitative practice. A good internship arrangement seeks to provide interns with a chance to experience the real world of work not to disguise the true nature of work relationship to secure cheap labour (Mabeba, 2019). Therefore, with this evidence, it is suggested that interns should be assigned activities that will boost their capacity. Moreover, the study results also indicate that access to work resources for interns require improvement. Resource availability can enable graduate interns to acquire adequate work experience. A substantial number of interns reported to have no laptops to do their work when they are “out of office”. As found in this research study, intern’s access to laptops, access to the internet, and access to open telephone lines constitute the resource limitation for their progressive work and learning. Based on the previous research, internship is an opportunity for new graduates to put into practise what they learned from higher learning institutions (Clarke, 2017; Sleep & Reed, 2006). However, in the context of this study, interns were found unable to do their work properly due to the lack of work resources, a challenge which undermines the value of the local government internship programme.

11. Conclusion

This study explored whether local government internship is a work experience opportunity or a form of exploitation of South African graduates. The study demonstrated that the local government internship programme can positively provide graduates with the skills and work experience needed in the labour market. However, the results of this study are disappointing as it was discovered that the local government internship is largely exploitative. This study qualified the local government internship as exploitative based on the following factors evident in the results; the value of internship to interns is insignificant; interns are underpaid; interns are overworked; interns experience workplace abuse; poor mentorship and support for interns and inadequate work resources for interns. It was discovered that the municipality's graduate internship programme is currently not protected by an appropriate policy. This study therefore recommends an appropriate policy for the local government internship programme. This policy should stipulate how graduate interns in various department should be treated, paid, and allocated work. It is also very important that appropriate education on local government workplace policies is provided to interns in order to understand their rights and unfair labour practices. This study also recommends for the training of mentors on mentorship and supervision of interns in the work environment. Appropriate monitoring and evaluation systems for the local government internship programme are also crucial to address the challenges associated with the internship programme and to enhance the benefits of the internship to graduates. All these recommendations are crucial in addressing the exploitative nature of the local government internship.

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