

Implementation of Internship Programs Enhances Graduate Employability: South African Context

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ABSTRACT

The South African government is grappling with youth unemployment and poverty, exacerbated by a lack of experience and skills required for job positions. The study explores the implementation of internship programs to enhance graduate employability, aiming to address South Africa's youth unemployment issue. Public Service has implemented internship programs to curb graduate unemployment, providing graduates with skills and experience to secure future employment. The study used a Mixed Research Method (MRM). Interviews and questionnaire data were collected concurrently from two different sample sizes. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, whereas qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis found four main themes: experience, skills, unemployment, and job opportunity. A sample size of ($N=190$) participants from the Limpopo Department of Education. The study indicates that internships enhance graduate employability for interns after the program, primarily due to the acquired skills and experience. Forty-one (41%) of respondents believe that internship programs provide graduates with valuable work experience for employability. The study contributes to the existing literature and policymakers in the Limpopo Department of Education and other institutions by enhancing internship experiences and enhancing future job prospects through experiential learning theory. The Department should implement internship programs that positively impact graduates' employability. The study concludes that internships are vital in addressing youth unemployment and providing work experience for graduates.



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1. Introduction

Human Sciences Research Council (2023) highlights that internship programs aim to equip university graduates with practical work experience in diverse fields, thereby increasing their employment prospects. The internship is a learning process involving ongoing activities designed to improve knowledge, skills, and attitudes in specific work fields over a set period. Adeosun et al. (2022) students gain practical experience in the work environment, providing valuable feedback to institutions on the significance of the curriculum. An internship enhances academic learning by offering practical training, professional networking, and work relevance to interns. The specific objectives of the internship program are: 1) to offer graduates the prospect of acquiring work exposure in relevant fields; 2) to provide work experience to graduates; 3) To relate a pool of skill sets readily available for permanent positions; and 4) to lower several jobless graduates. Soffi and Mohamad (2021) highlight that internships enable graduates to apply their classroom knowledge and skills, leading to comprehensive subject learning.

The Department faces challenges in effectively implementing internships due to insufficient financial and human resources. Adeosun et al. (2021) allude that the main obstacle is the insufficient facilities and human and financial resources required to enhance the effectiveness of an effective internship program. The Limpopo Department of Education (2021/2022), post-COVID-19, has experienced significant disruptions in implementing internship programs and fostering innovative learning methods. Mchunu and Mutereko (2020) highlight a shortage of trained mentors in the workplace during internship programs. The lack of well-equipped trainers can hinder the interns' learning process by limiting the provision of necessary knowledge, skills, and experience. According to the Department of National Treasury (2014), the Department should provide interns with written policies and procedures for performance evaluation and feedback upon starting internship programs. The internship program's contractual nature may lead to interns experiencing unemployment, contradicting the LDoE's (2019/2020) recommendation for quality internships to break the unemployment cycle. The current scarcity of resources is hindering the pace of learning. The LDoE (2023/2024) notes that planning and providing appropriate educational resources and support can be challenging when the precise beneficiaries are determined.

The Department's inadequate funding, staffing, and office space may impede the significance of internship programs. According to Koyana (2014) and Adeosun et al. (2021), the Department faces a significant challenge in executing an efficient internship program due to the lack of necessary facilities, personnel, and funding. The LDoE (2019/2020) found that only a few individuals deemed their competencies below expected levels during tests. Mchunu and Mutereko (2020) agree that there is a general shortage of skilled mentors during internship programs. Section 195(1) (h) of the Constitution of South Africa, 1996, and Section 16(1) (c) of the Skills Development Act, 1998, emphasize internships and human capital development in Public Administration and skill occupation. Section 5(2) (b) of the Skills Development Levies Act, 1999 (Act No.9 of 1999) accentuates the support of training needs of diverse categories of employees' skills capacity. Internship programs are crucial for achieving the Capacity Development Pillar of Human Resource Development Strategic Framework Vision, 2015 for Public Service. According to Bola et al. (2015), internships are designed to provide a bridging period of practice under supervision before being able to practice independently. Skemer et al. (2017) argue that internships provide unemployed graduates the necessary skills and experience to improve their employment prospects and enter productive activities.

Northern Development (2021) maintains that internship programs provide new graduates with comprehensive professional development and training, including preparation for local government careers, capacity building, and community succession planning. O'Higgins & Pinedo (2018) European countries discovered strong evidence that any work experience obtained during higher education improves future employment prospects four to

five years after graduation. The article explores the implementation of internship programs to enhance graduate employment opportunities in South Africa. Internships can provide graduate students with work-related experience and practical application of knowledge in a professional setting before or after graduation.

Stewart et al. (2018) point out that apprenticeships and temporary jobs, also known as internships or traineeships in Europe, have become crucial in transitioning from education to employment, particularly in higher-income countries. Gerloff and Reinhard (2019) confirm that Duale Hochschule Baden-Wuerttemberg, Germany's first university to integrate academic studies and work experience, offers a dual, practice-oriented degree program with 3-month phases of theoretical study and practical training. Martin and Rouleau (2020) study revealed that 74.6% of Canadian students who worked in their field of study during post-secondary education had full-time employment within three months of graduation. According to Bouwer et al. (2021), the USA offers experiential learning through apprenticeships, providing industry-driven, high-quality career pathways for employers, graduates, and employers offering paid work experience, classroom instruction, and nationally organized, portable credentials.

Public Service Commission (2016) asserts that Kenya's internship program aims to equip unemployed graduates with practical skills, enhancing their future employability and fulfilling legal professional registration requirements. Similarly, Learners' Industrial Attachment in Ghana is a work-based familiarity plan that offers students a real-life organizational background to develop essential skills for their specialized development Owusu-Acheampong et al. (2014). According to Haryanti et al. (2025), Indonesian universities' Japanese departments have been conducting internship programs in Japan since 2012, partnering with Japan's government, NGOs, and third-party companies.

Objectives of the study:

- To investigate the effectiveness of an internship program in enhancing graduate employability.
- To examine the significance of internships in reducing unemployment and poverty alleviation.

1.1. Problem

The Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) of 1st quarter of 2021 shows that young people are still struggling in the South African labor market. Young unemployed individuals face poverty, financial strain, limited career development opportunities, and poor job prospects. However, Maake-Malatji (2021) reveals that the transition from education to the labor market for most black graduates in South Africa remains increasingly challenging due to societal disadvantages. Societal disadvantages like racial disparities, graduates' skills, and pay disparities pose a systematic challenge in securing internships. The Quarterly Labour Force Survey (2021) shows that Black/African youth's unemployment rate was 36.7% in the first quarter. Department of Statistics South Africa (2020) states that youth inexperience in the labor force makes it challenging to find work. According to the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (2021), the graduate unemployment rate was 9.3% in the first quarter of 2021. Gathongo (2021) states that Internships provide unemployed graduates with work experience, enhancing their competitiveness in their job search.

Mabeba (2019) asserts that one of the difficulties facing developing nations like South Africa in the 21st century is the lack of skilled workers. Ngcwangu (2019) attests that skills shortages and poor education cause policies to be unable to reduce unemployment. Department of Statistics South Africa (2020) indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted employment, with 89.5% of those employed before the lockdown remaining employed, 8.1% losing jobs or businesses closing, and 1.4% becoming unemployed, including income loss. The Manpower Group Employment Outlook Survey (2021) reveals that 69% of

global employers face challenges filling vacancies, especially in South Africa, due to skills shortages in engineering, industrial psychology, and teaching. The study adopted experiential learning theory; according to Higley and Hayes (2020), Experiential Learning Theory is a pedagogical practice that places students in direct contact with the material being studied. Interns benefit from experiential learning, enabling them to acquire knowledge and work experience through practical experiences. Experiential learning theory is crucial as it offers new insights and knowledge to interns as they transition from theory to practical application of their learning. This study utilizes an experiential learning theory to understand and explain internship programs, promoting graduate employability and enabling informed responses to this phenomenon.

1.2. Solution

Internships are crucial for graduate employability. The Department should consider implementing effective internship programs to improve graduates' employability. It must align internship experiences with employer demands, clarify the employer-intern relationship, and ensure all participants achieve their goals. Interns should communicate with colleagues, form teams, pay attention, and engage to gain work experience within and outside LDoE. Interns should pay attention and fully engage to gain work experience from participating in internship programs. The Department should provide effective internships to reduce graduate unemployment and provide work experience to enhance scarce skills. During internship implementation, it is crucial to prioritize skills such as computer skills, problem-solving, and work-related experience. The Department should consider and accept interns, primarily those who have performed well, to offer them a permanent position at the end of their internships.

Researchers recommend that internships focus on providing graduates with valuable experience and skills. They should be knowledge-based, with a focus on public sector processes. Interns should be prepared to secure jobs after completing the program and become professional employees. Communication skills can be improved through interactions with colleagues. This can be achieved through collaboration, presentations, and professional events. Mentors should foster a positive learning environment, maintain a mentor-mentee relationship, and provide valuable feedback to their interns. Interns should be allowed to apply theory through experimentation, ensuring practical understanding and skill development. The LDoE internship programs should offer comprehensive training, competitive stipends, and departmental rotations to prepare interns for future employment. The Department should ensure interns participate in training and development programs to enhance their knowledge and skills.

1.3. Graduate Employability

An empirical study shows that graduates lack job market information and experience to enable interns to undertake this arduous journey (Ndlovu & Ndebele, 2019). Timothy (2018) attests that graduates who have qualifications without work experience or skills remain unemployed. As a result of a lack of skills and experience, graduates are impotent to exhibit their abilities in the labor market. According to Morsy and Mukasa (2019), graduates had difficulty finding work due to high educational requirements, a lack of professional experience, job unavailability, and job search skills. Insurance Sector of Education Training Authority (INSETA) (2020-2025) asserts that it is evident that applicants lack the appropriate educational work experience required for posts. Moumen and Mejjad (2021) define graduate employability as a compilation of a series of soft and hard skills and abilities that a graduate obtains to achieve and meet a desirable job requirement and succeed in a career.

Bist et al. (2020) contend that graduate employability refers to the skills, knowledge, and personal attributes that enable graduates to secure employment and succeed in their chosen occupation, benefiting themselves, their community, and the economy. According to Tran (2019), graduate employability is a collection of accomplishments, skills, understandings, and personal qualities that increase graduates' chances of finding employment and achieving success in their chosen professions. Ivkovic and McRae (2021) affirm that historically, internships have been tightly associated with outcomes related to employability and economic benefits. According to Itano-Boase et al. (2021), graduates have discovered a positive relationship between internships and employability. Graduate employability provides competencies and abilities that graduates need to enhance employment opportunities in the labor market.

Pretti et al. (2021) assert that internships allow graduates to track and reflect on capacity development in the context of predicted changes for the future of work. The quality of internship programs enormously affects employment opportunities, regardless of period status. Graduates with planned learning support show enhanced career readiness, a better understanding of workplace goals, and clarity about their desired future work (West & Stirling, 2021). Stirling et al. (2021) argue that internship graduates benefit from interventions like preparatory sessions to enhance self-efficacy and competence in securing placement matches while also addressing systemic barriers like lack of placements. Rose (2020) affirms that higher education institutions increasingly resort to internships to attract and identify graduate employees who will perform in the post-hire period. Internship programs result in higher employment rates, full-time employment, and earnings for graduates than non-participants. Graduates' employability in the job market is largely determined by their education quality (Aboagye & Puoza, 2021). Internship programs should offer work experience and career development services, which are crucial in combating unemployment, especially prolonged unemployment (The Department of Higher Education and Training, 2021).

According to Urban-Econ Development Economists (2020), internships allow graduates to enter the job market after completing a qualification and provide future employability opportunities. Hora et al. (2021) suggest internship experience enhances career self-confidence by developing social networks, acquiring skills, and adding experience to resumes, thus improving students' prospects in the labor market. Baert et al. (2021) state that there is a link between internship participation in tertiary education and positive post-graduate labor market outcomes. Stewart et al. (2021) assert that work experience improves employability by developing skills, knowledge, and experience, aiding graduates in matching human capital profiles to labor market demands and enhancing permanent marketability. Nogueira et al. (2021) state that internships offer valuable learning experiences and improve graduates' employment prospects. Bawica (2021) points out that employability educates graduates with the capability and competence to obtain a job. Nogueira et al. (2021) further point out that internship programs provide valuable learning outcomes and increase graduates' employment prospects. Kassa (2023) asserts that despite development agencies' efforts to reduce graduate challenges, employability remains a significant issue in third-world countries. Ndlovu and Ndebele (2019) state that in South Africa, ancient employability accounts are problematic because they fail to understand the path to future employment. Timothy (2018) states that theoretical knowledge is important but insufficient without practical training to ensure graduate employability.

1.4. Youth unemployment in South Africa

The NDP 2030 has set a visionary goal of reducing unemployment to 6% by 2030. Unemployment is influenced by low education, lack of appropriate skills and information, job hunting costs, lack of income, work experience, and limited social capital (Department of

Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, 2019). National Planning Commission (2017) asserts that the South African policy debate revolves around youth unemployment and uncertain labor market transition pathways, emphasizing the need for effective strategies. Bank SETA (2021-2022) affirms unemployment encompasses joblessness and an undereducated and inexperienced workforce, a challenge that post-secondary education and training face. However, a lack of market for employment information, skills, expertise, and political ties may cause graduate unemployment. High youth unemployment is due to a lack of skills and experience, a mismatch between education and training, and necessary job skills. Ndebele and Ndlovu (2019) concur that unemployment and underemployment are attributed to a lack of personal attributes, skills mismatch, and general capability. Mabeba's (2019) findings show that graduates learn desired skills, such as verbal communication, teamwork, and leadership problem-solving solving, as skills to use technology and office equipment.

Maake-Malatlje (2021) affirms that internships are initiated to alleviate the skills shortage within specific fields and reduce the high unemployment rate. Public Service Commission (2016) argues that despite high unemployment and skill shortages, the public service department lacks sufficient work-related training for youth and new graduates through leadership and internship programs. Graduates still struggle to acquire internship programs. Bouwer et al. (2021) posit that graduates enter a challenging, uncertain labor market where they compete for jobs and develop skills. Maskaeva and Msafiri (2021) found that unemployment rates are not uniform among population and age groups. Stewart et al. (2018) support that South Africa's youth unemployment rate, disproportionately affecting women, increased by 0.6% to 43.2% in Q1 2021 from Q4 2020, highlighting the country's challenges (Quarterly Labour Force Survey, 2021). De Lannoy et al. (2018) state that the National Youth Policy 2030 is a long-standing policy in South Africa that focuses on preparing youth for economic service programs. According to the Department of Basic Education (2017), the policy aims to promote youth employment, work experience, entrepreneurship, development of rural areas, education, health, and inclusion, including for those with disabilities. Department of Basic Education (2017) states that workplace-based learning has improved over time, with internships increasing by more than 200%, apprenticeships by 150%, and learner ships increasing by 63%. Completions increased by 65% in the same period.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Methodology

The study utilized the Pragmatic paradigm, a philosophical and epistemological framework for evaluating ideas and beliefs in practical application. Dawadi et al. (2021) used a mixed-method research (MMR) approach to assert that MMR is a principled complement to traditional quantitative and qualitative research methods. Institutional approval from the Limpopo Department of Education to recruit respondents for the study was obtained. The researcher interviewed ten participants for qualitative data, and 180 questionnaires were distributed to respondents for quantitative data, using both paper-based and email methods.

2.2 Data Collection

Approval was obtained from the Limpopo Department of Education for respondent recruitment. The study used closed-ended questionnaires to elicit spontaneous responses and avoid bias. Open-ended interviews allowed for more participant opinions. A total of 10 interviews were conducted with 180 respondents. The researcher conducted interviews with ten (10) and (180) respondents who were given paper-based and email questionnaires totaling 180. Data was collected simultaneously through questionnaires and face-to-face interviews

with 10 participants for qualitative data and 180 respondents for quantitative data. Participants were recruited in person, via phone, and email with consent.

2.3. Sample

The study included selected participants and respondents, specifically members of Executive Management, Senior Management, Middle Management, Junior Management, Operational Staff, Mentors, and Graduate Interns at the LDoE Head Office. The study had a sample of 190 participants, divided into two parts: 180 for quantitative data collection through questionnaires and 10 for qualitative data collection through interviews, with the first section providing total responses. A purposive sampling method was used to select participants with a degree and at least three years of experience at LDoE. The sample included executives, seniors, middle management, and graduate interns for interviews. It consisted of Executive Management, Senior Management, and Middle Management, including graduate interns for interviewing one (1) from each category and three (3) graduate interns. Simple random sampling ensured equal opportunities for all categories in the study to select from 180 respondents. This sample group was given questionnaires to complete. The data was collected simultaneously through interviews and questionnaires.

2.4. Data analysis

Data collected through questionnaires was analyzed through International Business Machine (IBM): Statistical and Product Service Solutions (SPSS 25.0) computer software. Data collected through questionnaires was analyzed using descriptive statistics. Data was presented through graphs, tables, percentages, and frequencies, followed by analysis and interpretation. The study used thematic analysis to analyze data collected through interviews from a group's personal experiences. Atlas. Ti was used for thematic data analysis in the study. The study applied Braun and Clarke's steps for thematic data analysis: familiarize, code, identify themes, review, define, and report. The researcher used opinions from data analysis, organized participant data, read through responses, coded data, interrelated themes, and interpreted findings against existing literature. The study was conducted at the Limpopo Department of Education Head Office in Polokwane, which is responsible for enhancing education quality. It focused solely on the Head office to ensure safety measures like social distancing were maintained. Social distancing and wearing of face masks were adhered to avoid contact, and for some participants, phone and email were used. The office comprises four branches, 12 Chief Directorates, 33 Directorates, and 10 Districts.

Table 2 Sample size

<u>Sample Group</u>	<u>Amount</u>	<u>Percentage (%)</u>
Executive & senior management	20	11
Middle Management	25	14
Junior Management	20	11
Mentors	25	14
Operational	20	11
Graduate intern	59	33
Learner ship Students	11	6
<u>Total Sample</u>	<u>180</u>	<u>100</u>

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results on The Internship Programs as a Strategy to Enhance Graduate Employability with Specific Reference to Limpopo Department of Education

3.1.1 Demographics of the Respondents

Overall, 180 respondents completed the questionnaires, of whom 54.4% were male (n=98/180) and 45.5% were female (n=82/180). The response rate was 100% (180/180). The respondents came from different sections/units in the Department. The age of respondents varied from less than 30 to 61-above, of which 33% were less than 30 years (n=59/180) while 17% (n=30/180) were between 31-4-, followed by 22% (n=40/180) who were between 41-50%, while 19% (n=35/180) were between 51-60 and lastly 9% (n=16/180) were 61 and above. Forty-four percent (n=79/180) of respondents showed Sepedi as their first language, followed by 28% (n=50/180) who indicated Tshivenda as their language, while 22% (n=40/180) were Xitsonga speaking. In contrast, the last 6% (n=11/180) spoke none of the above.

The study also wanted to find out the qualifications that respondents have acquired. The results indicate that 8% (n=15/180) had grade 12, followed by 27% (n=49/180) holding a diploma/degree, while 28% (n=50/180) held a B.Tech/Honours degree. Of the other respondents, 17% (n=30/180) revealed that they had an M.Tech/Master's degree, and lastly, 28% (n=50/180) had a D.Tech/Doctorate.

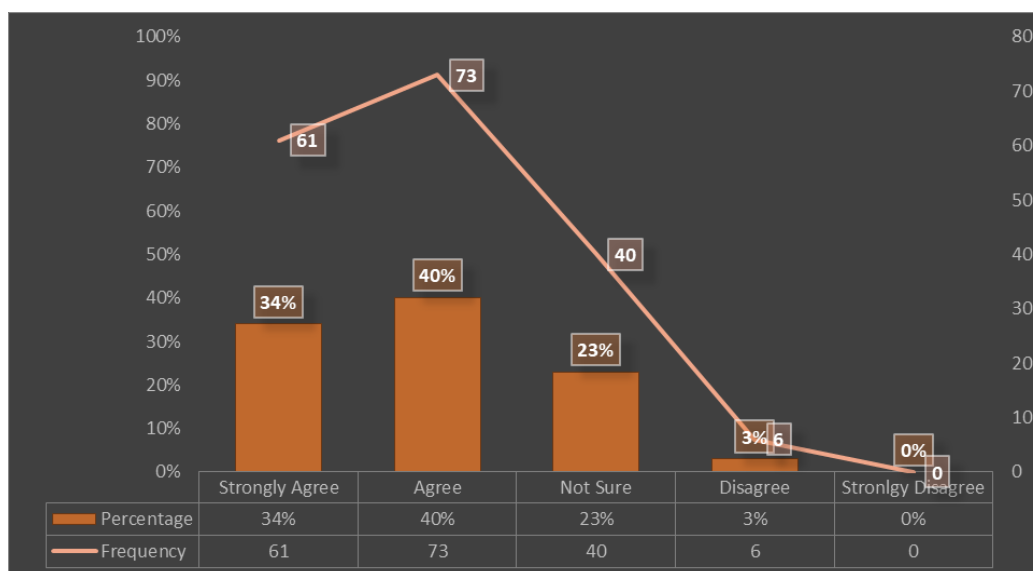


Figure 1 Internship Programs Enhance the Opportunity to Be Hired For Full-Time Employment

Figure 1 presents the frequency and the percentage of respondents who participated in the study. The bar graph depicts the frequencies, while the line graph indicates the percentage. Responses are based on a Likert scale from strongly agree to disagree strongly. The respondents strongly agreed that internship programs increase the likelihood of being hired for full-time employment. It is revealed that some respondents were unsure whether internship programs improve the possibility of being hired for full-time work. However, the results show that most respondents agreed with the question, with only a few disagreeing. The results show a link between participating in an internship program and landing a full-time job later. This is supported by the findings of O’Higgins & Pinedo (2018) that European countries discovered

strong evidence that any work experience during higher education enhances future employment prospects four to five years after graduation.

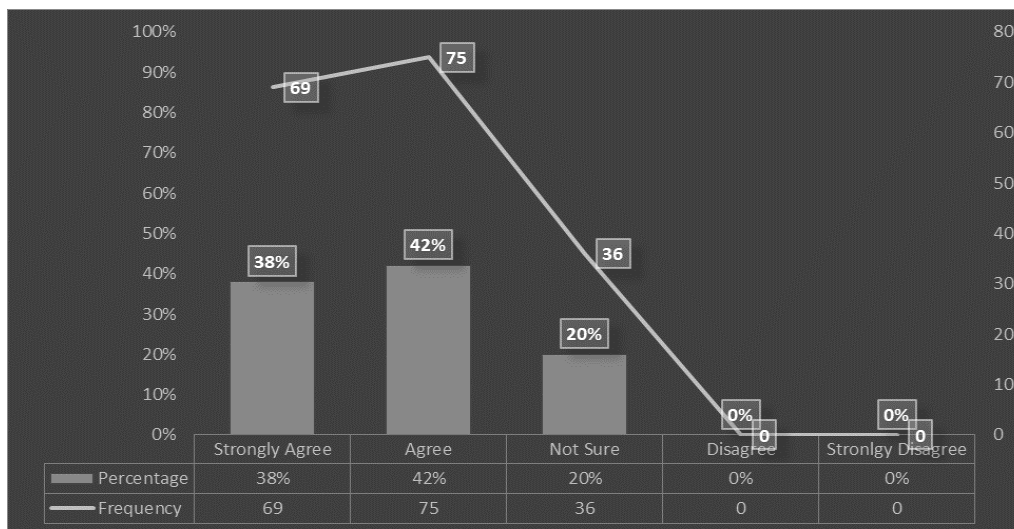


Figure 2 Interns Can Acquire Skills Such as Communication, Teamwork, Problem Solving, Computer During The Internship Program to Use in Future Job

Figure 2 shows the frequency and the percentage of respondents who participated in the study. The bar graph shows the frequencies, while the line graph presents the percentage. Their responses are based on a Likert scale from strongly agree to disagree strongly. The findings show that participants in the study strongly agreed that interns learn skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and computer use during the internship program. The findings reveal that some respondents were unsure whether interns could learn new skills. The results further indicate that the majority of respondents agreed with the question at hand. The results reveal a positive relationship between recent graduates who participate in internships and their ability to gain skills, as supported by respondents who agreed. This is more positively reflected in Mabeba's (2019) findings, which show that during internships, graduates acquire desired skills such as verbal communication, teamwork, and leadership problem-solving skills, as well as how to use technology and office equipment.

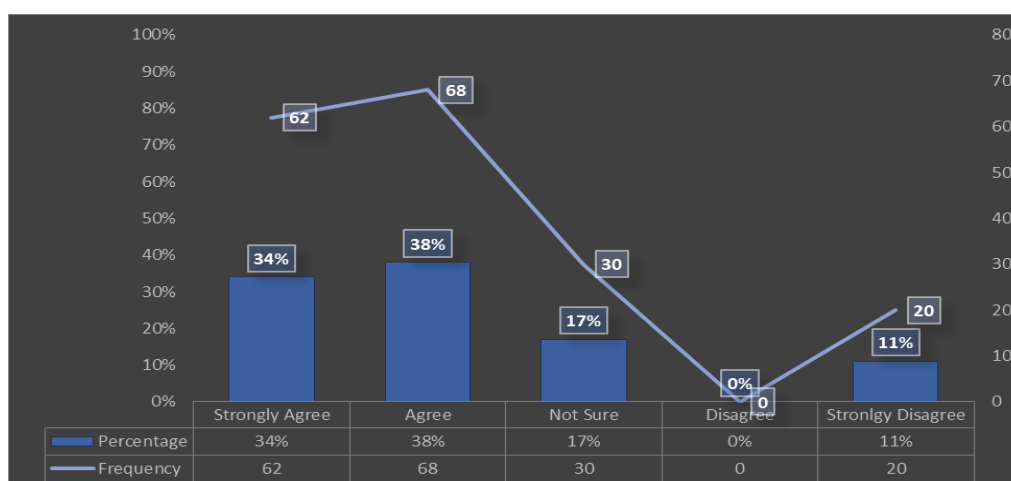


Figure 3 Internship Programs in The Department Have a Career Development for Graduate Employability

Figure 3 displays the frequency and the percentage of respondents who participated in the study. The bar graph depicts the frequencies, while the line graph indicates the percentage. Their responses are based on a Likert scale from strongly agree to disagree strongly. The results show that respondents strongly agreed that internship programs in the Department have a career development for graduate employability, while only a few strongly disagreed. The results also show that some respondents were unsure if internship programs at the Department promote career development and graduate employability. The results show that the majority of respondents agreed with the question. It can be argued that internships play a role in intern career development, leading to graduate employability. A potential explanation is that interns are currently developing their careers and will decide whether to continue in their current positions or change based on their internship experience. Career development services should be an integral part of internships and adult learning programs and should be seen as key to preventing unemployment, particularly long-term unemployment (Department of Basic Education, 2017).

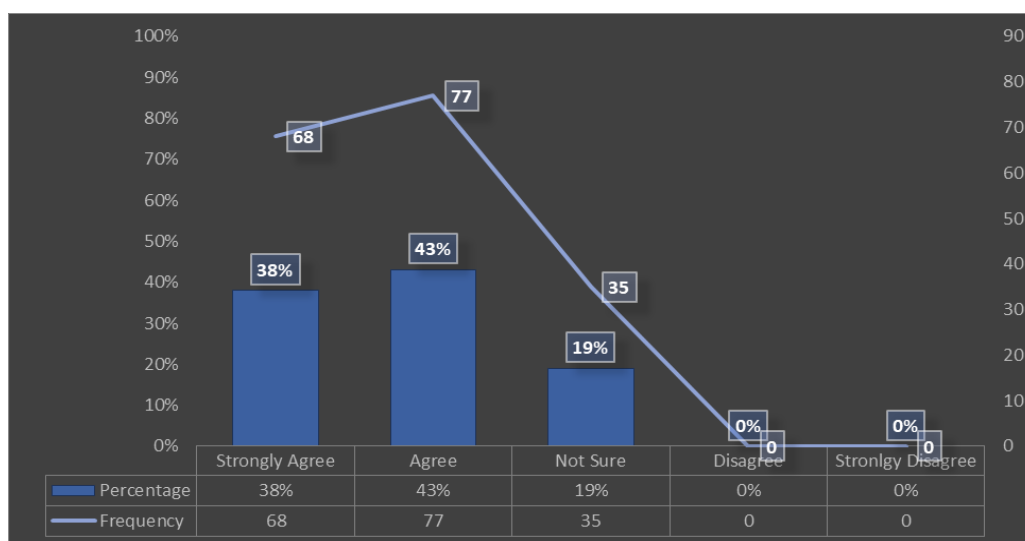


Figure 4 Graduates are Able to Gain Work Experience for Employability

Figure 4 demonstrates the frequency and the percentage of respondents who participated in the study. The bar graph portrays the frequencies, while the line graph shows the percentage. Their responses are based on a Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The results revealed that participants strongly agreed that graduates gain work experience during their internship. The results also show that respondents were unsure if graduates might acquire work experience. The results further show that most respondents agreed with the question, while none disagreed. One plausible explanation is that graduates who participate in internship programs gain work experience. There is a positive relationship between graduates participating in internships and acquiring or gaining work experience. In conclusion, trainees who engage in internships for a set period gain work experience. The same view is found to create an avenue for unemployed graduates to gain work experience and enable them to have a competitive edge in their job search (Gathongo, 2021).

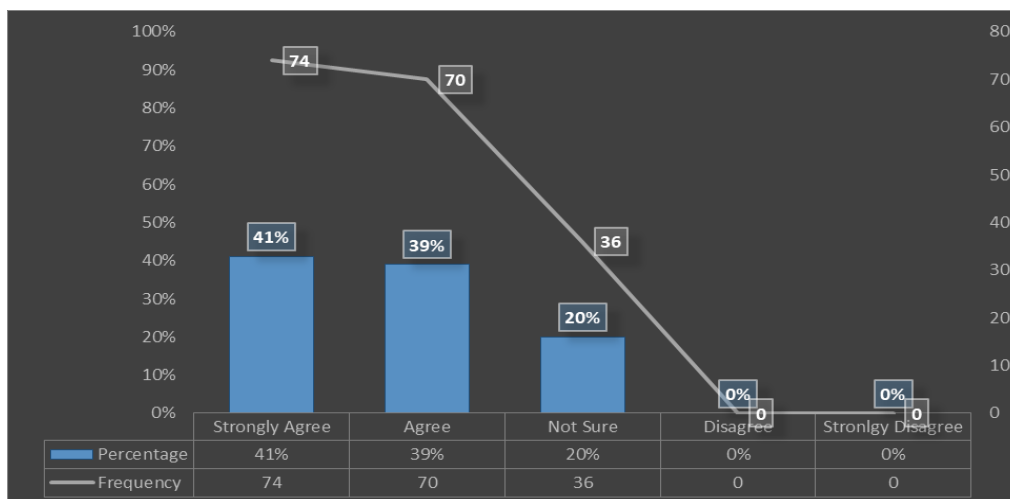


Figure 5 Internships is The Strategy to Provide Graduate Employability

Figure 5 exhibits the frequency and the percentage of respondents who participated in the study. The bar graph illustrates the frequencies, while the line graph indicates the percentage. Their responses are based on a Likert scale from strongly agree to disagree strongly. The results revealed that respondents believe that internships offer graduate employability, with none strongly disagreeing. It was further revealed that respondents were unclear on whether an internship provides an opportunity for graduate employability. Based on the findings, internships accurately provide an opportunity for graduate employability, which benefits interns who seek employment after their internship. A potential explanation is that by participating in internship programs, interns increase their chances of landing a job in the Department where they interned or elsewhere in various fields of study. Pietersen and Malatjie (2022) support that internship programs are part of the response initiatives to increase young graduates' access to available jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities.

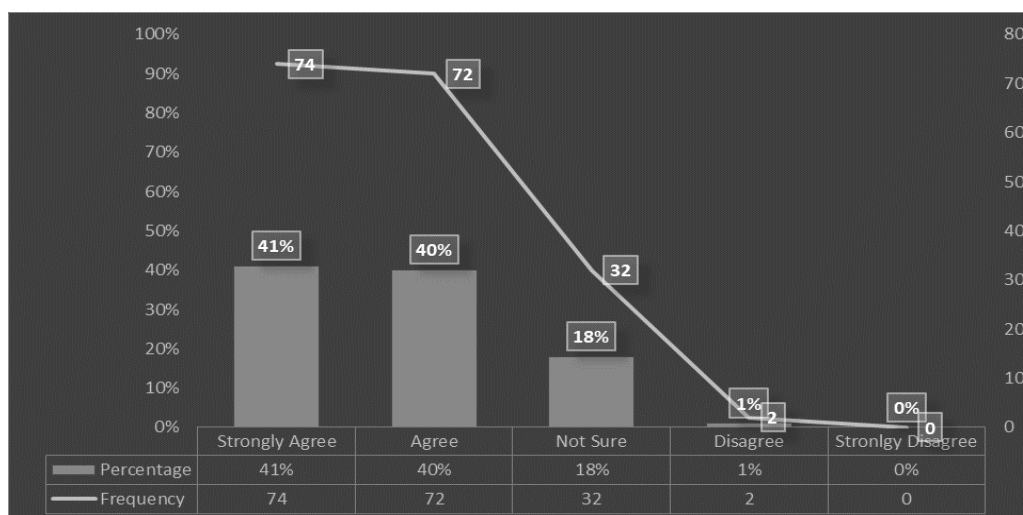


Figure 6 Graduate Internships Reduce Graduate Unemployment

Figure 6 presents the frequency and the percentage of respondents who participated in the study. The bar graph depicts the frequencies, while the line graph shows the percentage. Their responses are based on a Likert scale from strongly agree to disagree strongly. The results show that respondents strongly agreed that internships help reduce graduate

unemployment, while none disagreed. The data indicates that respondents are uncertain about the potential impact of an internship on reducing graduate unemployment. According to the results, the vast majority strongly agreed that internships provide an opportunity for graduate employability, which benefits interns who seek employment after their internship. One possible explanation is that by participating in internship programs, interns can increase their chances of landing a job in the Department where they interned or elsewhere in various fields. The findings of Marie-Jeanne (2020) demonstrate that study programs that include internships tend to significantly enhance graduates' employability, which reflects positively on graduate unemployment, particularly within public higher education institutions.

3.1.2. Summary of Themes and Explanations from Interviews

Theme: Experience

Research findings revealed that the majority of graduates are employed after participating in an internship because they gained experience and skills, which increases graduate employability. It is also revealed that the skills and experience gained during the internship can be applied to future job endeavors. Internship programs enhance the opportunity to be hired for full-time employment because of the work experience acquired. Moreover, results show that graduate interns get the opportunity to explore and understand the Public Sector while gaining experience by working under an experienced person. It was revealed that an internship provides exposure to practical aspects of the workplace environment. It was also revealed that it is critical in assisting graduates to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Internships in the Department ought to be aimed at closing the gap that exists between theory and practice through extensive training.

Theme: Skills

Interns can acquire communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and computer skills during the internship program that they can use in future jobs. The findings revealed that internships aid in acquiring skills, experience, and understanding of work procedures in a formal workplace. It also appears to aid in the acquisition of work experience. It is further revealed that it aids in the development of new skills. As a result, it provides graduates with the opportunity to gain skills and prepare them for the workforce with skills obtained. Furthermore, participants reported that it improves the intern's ability to communicate with others. It was also stated that it promotes personal development and interpersonal relationships.

Theme: Unemployment

Internship programs in the Department have career development for graduate employability and reduce the unemployment rate. Internship programs offer the opportunity to be employed permanently upon their completion. It is also indicated that it helps gain work experience for graduate employability. Graduate internships reduce graduate unemployment, which is a major challenge facing the country. Graduate internships also play a role in reducing youth graduate unemployment, which reflects positively on youth unemployment. Internships significantly reduce graduate unemployment by enhancing their chances of finding future employment.

Theme: Job opportunity

It was revealed that internships serve as a foundation for permanent job opportunities. Internship programs enhance employability by providing interns with work experience and new skills across various fields, thereby enhancing their employability. Internships enhance graduate employability by providing students with valuable workplace knowledge, especially in the public sector, which boosts their chances of getting hired. Internships are crucial for graduate employability as they provide two years of employment and stipends, enabling graduates to secure entry-level jobs. Additionally, because the Department is so large, interns are exposed to new challenges, job opportunities, and growth. Internships are the strategy to provide graduate employability.

3.2. Discussion

The findings revealed that internships increase their chances of graduate employability before and after the internship program due to the skills and experience acquired. This correlates with the findings of Samuk et al. (2023) that internships are also known to improve graduates' employability. Internships allow graduates to gain work experience while learning new skills. It was also discovered that interns learn new information about workplace processes and procedures, particularly those related to the public sector. Research findings indicate that internship programs improve the chances of full-time employment by enhancing skills like communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and computer use. Department internship programs aid in career development for graduates, reducing unemployment. The study indicates that internship programs are a crucial strategy for enhancing the employability of graduates and gaining work experience. It was also discovered that graduates who participated in internship programs could secure permanent jobs due to the experience they gained. Malapane and Mukonza (2023). Graduate interns benefitted from technical and strategic training opportunities tailored to their career needs, improving their employability prospects. Furthermore, interns benefit from having the opportunity to function in the working and professional world. Mabeba and Sebola (2023) agree that internship programs are one way to prepare interns for future employment opportunities, as some interns were offered jobs elsewhere after completing their internship period.

Interns could improve their communication skills while participating in internship programs by communicating with other employees and interns and working in groups, discovered. Mabeba et al. (2023) findings show that interns can learn a wide range of skills, including communication, problem-solving, conflict resolution, reporting, social interaction, and basic computer skills. Findings further revealed that internships help acquire skills, experience, and understating work procedures in the formal workplace. Pietersen and Malatjie's (2022) study findings confirm that people who have completed an internship program are more self-assured, skilled, and experienced. It was indicated that it is vital to prepare graduate interns to be fully equipped to function in the professional world while getting a stipend on top of learning. Graduate internships also play a role in reducing youth graduate unemployment, which reflects positively on youth unemployment. Internships allow graduates to bridge a theory learned in class to practical work, allowing them to gain new knowledge. This is consistent with the findings of Arthur and Koomson (2024), who demonstrate that work-based learning can effectively bridge the gap between theory and practice, making graduates more employable.

Furthermore, extensive training at the entry-level of Public Service benefits interns by teaching them to be effective, efficient, and productive at work. Interns are given ample opportunities to learn while receiving a stipend. Finally, interns rotate through different units and attend workshops to benefit themselves, and interns learn to cope independently and collaboratively.

Internships offer exposure to the professional environment, networking, and valuable experience. They provide insight into governmental operations, fostering relationships with colleagues and officials. Interns receive training on entry-level public service roles, leading to potential job opportunities. Key benefits include rotating through departments, attending workshops, and learning to adapt. Results revealed that it provides opportunities to learn about the operations of government departments. Interns are taught to be productive, effective, efficient, communicative, and strategic in the workplace. Graduate interns gain experience and understanding of the Public Sector by working with experienced professionals. The Department should incorporate positive internships into its strategic planning and internship policy to boost interns' chances of employment.

4. Conclusion

The triumph in creating job opportunities, skills development, alleviating poverty, and improving graduate employability while providing work experience is determined by establishing and implementing internship programs. The country's current issues factors, such as those found in the study, are central to the implementation of internship programs. The Limpopo Department of Education is prioritizing the implementation of internships; however, there are still challenges that Department faces, such as financial and human resources, which affect the effective implementation of internships. Not having enough well-trained, skilled mentors is also challenging for the Department. The data analysis indicates that the Department must take identified themes seriously across all areas, including other organizations and departments. The country's situation necessitates effective consideration of internship programs, addressing issues affecting youth and graduates to provide employment, skills, and experience and combat poverty, inequality, and unemployment. The study contributes to the existing knowledge of literature and policymakers in LDoE through applying experiential learning theory, providing valuable insights for policymakers. The study's findings are significant and suggest a need for further research. The study's findings, specific to the Limpopo Department of Education, should be cautiously applied to other departments for further evaluation. Future research should focus on assessing the effectiveness of internship programs across different departments.

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