



The assessment of a connection between internship programme and employee career progression: an analysis of South African internship programmes



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ABSTRACT

Over the years, internship programmes have been used by the government to reduce youth unemployment. However, there is no clear indication of the extent to which the programmes enhance the career progression of recipients and whether internship programmes are essential in determining an individual career path. Hence, the study sought to examine the relationship between internship programme and career progression. A quantitative study was adopted to investigate the relationship of internship programmes with the career progressions of recipients in South Africa. The data was collected from Mbombela Municipality's current internship candidates and employees who were absorbed from the internship programme using a four-point Likert scale self-developed questionnaire. Out of one hundred research instruments distributed to research participants that were identified based on purposeful and convenient non-probability sampling, only seventy useful responses were retrieved. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the participant's demographic information, while Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was used to analyse the relationship between the internship programme and career progression. The result was 0.001, which means that a positive linear correlation exists between internship programmes and career progression. When managed correctly, these programmes can effectively curb the unemployment rate through absorption, personal development, and providing the right experience matching their qualifications. Furthermore, by emphasising the subtle aspects of internship programmes that have significantly impacted each programme participant's career growth, the study contributes to the existing knowledge of the study variables in order to structure internship programmes according to the educational qualification and provide participants with the required tools that will enhance a positive career progression when the internship is concluded.

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Introduction

Over the years, the government of South Africa has increased funding for internship programmes to develop widespread employment for youth. Youth and graduate unemployment have been on the increase in the country for distinct reasons, and the predominant reason provided by employers was a lack of skills and experience from fresh graduates (Meyer, 2017). The government funding for the internship programme has been a sort of brief employment to provide young graduates with the needed skills and experience for future work (Pietersen & Mlatijie, 2022). Internship programmes have been a significant opportunity for the employment of disadvantaged young people and have been defined as career prospects monitored and offered to students and graduates through the partnership of academic establishments and organisations (Mkhize, 2019; Anjum, 2020). The internship programmes are usually based on the graduate field of study. The programme allows participants to get work experience in certain occupations before entering the labour market (Sides & Mrvica, 2017).

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Over 43,000 young people were enrolled in the South African government's graduate internship programmes in 2022 as an effort by the government to create employment. Nevertheless, the unemployment rate is increasing yearly. However, there is no clear indication of the number of unemployed graduates previously employed through the internship programme. However, unemployed graduates are also increasing as graduate unemployment is currently at 10.6% compared to 9.5% in 2012. Due to the increase in funding for internship programmes and the number of participants, the unemployment rate should be decreasing, but it is increasing. The internship programmes have failed to reduce unemployment among graduates (Maluleke, 2023). Likewise, the actual training meant to be acquired during the internship programme was faulted by recipients as deeming the internship programmes lacking correct supervision. The challenge with the internship programmes arose from the placement part of the programme participants, the structure of the internship programme, the management, and the retention plan of the programme participants. One of the failures of governmental institutions was that internship programmes were not always appropriately structured (Mabeba, 2019; Mohlokana et al., 2023). According to Pietersen and Mlatijie (2022), the absorption rate of the programme participants into the labour market was low, and 42% of those who completed internship programmes were still unemployed. In order to investigate the success rate of the internship programmes in South Africa, despite the government's continuous increased investment. The study examines the relationship between the internship programmes and participants' career progression. The study hypothesised that there is no significant relationship between the internship programme and the career progression of the recipients.

Literature Review

Internship programmes vary significantly depending on the country's cultural norms, labour laws, educational systems, and economic conditions. The core concept of experiential learning qualifies any internship programme in any part of the world to fall under the term (O'Higgins & Pinedo, 2018). Internship programmes are a global concept that provides individuals with valuable work experience while benefiting organisations through fresh talent and skill contributions (DPSA, 2006). The structure and objectives of internships may vary based on cultural, legal, and industry-specific factors. Still, the overarching goal remains to bridge the gap between academic learning and professional application (Ismail, 2018; Galloway et al., 2014).

The labour market is increasingly becoming competitive. Earning an entry-level job is increasingly difficult as job seekers lack experience and abilities. Internship programmes are seen as a stepping stone into entry-level jobs, necessary for graduates from all fields to gain the practical experience required to perform duties effectively and apply the theory learnt in the classroom in the workplace. Internship programme experience could be pretty important for participants in developing employability skills. Consequently, internship programmes have become a well-liked method of bridging the gap between college and employment since the 1980s. Graduates frequently prioritise future employment success while choosing internship programmes (Baert et al., 2021). Internship programmes around the world are created with the notion of equipping programme participants with an opportunity to gain work experience (Pietersen & Mlatijie, 2022). Whether the programme is required to achieve a qualification typically done for one year to 18 months or it is an internship programme that primarily provides work experience to unemployed people, which could be substantially shorter, the programme participant obtains work experience.

An internship programme has a start and end date, typically 3 to 24 months, depending on the company and field. Initially, the programme participants should be provided with details about the organisation, the programme, and the programme's conditions and obligations, such as mandatory work experience activities and mentor support. The programme participants receive remuneration and are entitled to leave and other employment terms during the period of the internship programme contract. The programme participants are considered employees for the contract duration. The programme participants receive a service certificate at the end of the internship (Koyana et al., 2018).

The programme does not guarantee employment with the host employer. Instead, the employer may choose to recruit new workers from among the outstanding programme participants who match the employer's selection requirements (Arthur & Koomson, 2022). The programmes usually follow the following criteria: A written and legally binding contract describing the length of the internship, remuneration, and a description of learning objectives and tasks attached to the contract. A decent remuneration that does not fall below the EU poverty level of 60% median income or, if more favourable, the national minimum wage, in accordance with the duties done by the intern and working hours as well as overtime, should be awarded in addition (O'Higgins & Pinedo, 2018). Similarly, the internship programme is expected to be aligned and guided by an underlying theoretical structure, which the study establishes on Kolb's experiential learning theory.

Theoretical Framework for the Study

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory focused on the learner's emotional, perceptual, cognitive, and behavioural components. The theory was based on the work of Dewey (1938), Lewin (1951), and Piaget (1971). Kolb defined learning as a four-stage cycle involving tangible experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimenting (Kong, 2021). The first stage of Kolb's theory was concrete experience, which meant the learner had solid experience. The learners' experience may be fresh from a learning institution or adaptation of old ideas into new circumstances. The learners reflect on the new learning experience to understand the connection between what was known and what was just learned, understand the related differences, and adjust accordingly. Abstract conceptualisation is the process whereby new ideas emerge through critical thinking (learning from experience). Lastly, active experimentation implied that new or changed contents triggered experimentation. The learner evaluated

their ideas in the real world to observe what occurred (McLeod, 2023). Learning through experience was the focus of experiential learning. Kolb (1984) created the idea after being prompted by the work of other theorists. Experiential learning theory differs from behavioural and cognitive theories in that psychological theories explain the significance of thought patterns in learning. In contrast, behavioural approaches neglect subjective experience's potential role in learning (Cherry, 2022).

Due to its proposed stage-based approach to learning, experiential learning theory, however widely utilised, has been critiqued. According to Seaman (2017), the challenge with the experiential theory was that it did not recognise that many learning processes could occur simultaneously. According to Kong (2021), the approach neglected the learner's social, cultural, and historical components. Regardless of these arguments, given the learning theory's relevance to integrating educational knowledge with real-world practical experience and its widespread use in higher education settings.

Kolb's experiential theory is appropriate for the study because it explains how people learn through doing, how internship programmes offer knowledge to the recipients and how the internship structure promotes the recipients' learning. The study was linked to this theory because it focused on internship programmes in the workplace with guidance provided by all relevant stakeholders. An internship programme accommodated the participant's mistakes more than when one was a permanent employee. The programme participants do work activities and reflect on how they could have done better or what challenges stood in the way of performing the work well. An internship programme allowed the candidates to apply the theories learnt at school in the workplace (Stirling et al., 2017). Concrete experience is the step that involves creating a genuine experience through doing. In an internship programme, the programme participants were given tasks to perform and were, therefore, supposed to do the tasks so that learning could occur. The idea was to apply what had been learnt under mentor guidance to execute the tasks. The second step was reflective observation, which involved acting back from doing to reflect and review the task that was at hand. This allowed the intern to assess how the tasks had been done, the challenges faced, and what could have been done differently. Abstract conceptualisation looked at what the programme participants had learned from the experience. The programme participants took this from the practical; their understanding and knowledge added to the theoretical knowledge they already had. The final stage was active experimentation. It happened when they considered how to put what they had learned into practice when the intern planned to apply it. Hence, based on this all-encompassing approach to experiential learning provided by Kolb theory, the study explore how this experience could enhance the recipients' career progression.

South African Concept of Internship Programme.

Internship programmes are governed by laws that are relevant to each country. The Skills Development Act 27 of 1998 regulates internship programmes in South Africa and is typically offered by Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs). South Africa has focused on skills development through various frameworks and initiatives to address unemployment, enhance employability, and promote economic growth. One of the primary frameworks for skills development in South Africa has been the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which has provided a structured framework for recognising and validating skills and qualifications. Additionally, the Skills Development Act 97 of 1998 established the legislative foundation for skills development in the graduate (Koyana et al., 2018). The purpose of the Skills Development Act of 1998, amongst many, was to boost the labour market's levels of investment in education and training while enhancing the return on that investment, to motivate employers to use the workplace as a dynamic setting for learning, to give employees a chance to learn new skills and to provide opportunities for those just entering the workforce to obtain job experience. In relation to internship programmes, the act encouraged the existence of internship programmes to bridge the gap in skills development in the country.

In South Africa's public service, internship programmes have been implemented since 2002. They were designed to allow graduates to obtain work experience in a professional setting to improve their academic and professional knowledge (Pietersen & Mlatijie, 2022). An internship was a planned, controlled, and managed programme that gave work experience for a set time, which could continue for up to two years. An internship had alternatively been defined as career-specific work experience that one undertook during/after studies to gain the practical knowledge required to operate and positively contribute to the career path one ultimately pursued (Maake-Malatji, 2021). Internship programmes were widely acknowledged as one of the most successful tools for stimulating job creation and an excellent means of promoting the incorporation of unemployed, inexperienced young into the formal sector, supporting social development (Willis, 2018). Cerulli-Harms (2017) and Pietersen and Mlatijie (2022) also agreed that university graduates' short-term practical job experiences, such as internship programmes, increase their chances of obtaining regular employment.

Programme participants eligible for internship programmes in South Africa were students, recent graduates, and any graduate under 35 years old (Agoston et al., 2017). There is a starting and end date as it was a fixed-term employment contract, and the duration varied from one organisation to the others. The job experience that participants received from the programme should have been appropriate and relevant to their level of qualification. Programmes for internships were typically designed and run to consider the host organisation's and department's need to prevent programme participants from been redundant at work (Philip et al., 2013). Participants in the programme were hired to support the permanent and experienced staff, but not to replace them. Businesses in South Africa represent the country's diversity through having a diverse workforce. Therefore, the internship programme is also expected to promote diversity by increasing opportunities and access for individuals from various backgrounds. Participants in the

programme were chosen in accordance with the Employment Equity Act and the requirement for demographic representation (Saxena, 2014). There are two types of popular internship programmes, namely;

Professional Internship Programme

Professional internship programmes are official internships that can be planned by higher education institution staff for academic credit. The programmes can run from over a few weeks to twelve months, and the employers could give an allowance. Examples of professional internship programmes are work-integrated learning, apprenticeships, graduate internship programmes and in-service training, amongst many others. Work-integrated learning programmes (WIL) are designed to integrate classroom learning with practical work experience (Jeong & Mcmillian, 2015). Apprenticeships focus on providing hands-on training and skills development in trades and artisanal professions. Apprenticeships involve mentorship and on-the-job training under the guidance of skilled professionals (Gessler, 2019). Graduate internships are designed for recent university graduates to gain practical experience in their chosen fields. These programmes aim to help graduates transition from academia to the workplace and allow them to apply their knowledge in real-world scenarios (Pietersen & Mlatijie, 2022; Mabeba, 2019).

In-service training also refers to the practical training students in technical or vocational fields undergo in their academic programmes. Students are expected to have to complete several hours or months of in-service training to qualify for their respective qualifications (Omar, 2014; Michael, 2017). According to Comyn and Brewer (2018), 63% of college graduates who completed a paid internship got a job offer, compared to 35% of those who did not. Employers were more likely to offer employment to a student before graduation if they had completed an internship or cooperation, particularly if it was paid work. Graduates who participated in paid internships had starting salaries that were 28% higher than those of their contemporaries who did not. Paid internships and cooperatives increased the likelihood of graduates being offered full-time jobs and higher salaries.

Professional internships were prevalent in the hospitality, business, and healthcare industries because they allowed students to gain practical skills that could only be obtained through on-the-job training (Ismail, 2018). Many qualifications offered by tertiary education institutions include structured practical workplace learning as a requirement for the qualification award. For example, students enrolled in Diplomas and Bachelor of Technology (B. Tech) programmes at universities of technology must complete an internship programme for 24 weeks in the workplace in South Africa. The National Accredited Technical Education Diploma (NATED) programmes offered by Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges require 18 months' practical application of knowledge in a workplace for the student to be awarded the National Diploma on NQF Level 6 (Maertz et al., 2014).

Internship programmes also require professional registration for engineering, legal and medical occupations. Practitioners are required to register with a professional body before they are allowed to practice the profession. Such practitioners must complete an internship programme covering specified requirements and obligations after obtaining the qualification for the occupation. For example, a pharmacy internship of 12 months is compulsory for those who have completed a Bachelor of Pharmacy degree and wish to register with the SA Pharmacy Council (SAPC) as a pharmacist (Maake-Malatji, 2021).

General Internship Programmes

General internship programmes are optional and allow students to gain experience and exposure to an industry or organisation in a condensed timeframe (Missman et al., 2023). Examples of general internship programmes are seasonal, corporate and government internship programmes. Seasonal internships are shorter-term programmes offered during university breaks, typically during summer (Ivana, 2019). Corporate internship programmes are offered to attract and develop young talent and can vary widely in terms of duration, focus, and industry. These internship programmes expose the non-profit sector and allow individuals to contribute to social and community initiatives. Government internship programmes are common in South Africa. Government departments and agencies use the internship programme to provide students with insight into the workings of the public sector and opportunities to contribute to government projects and initiatives (Stirling et al., 2017).

Research shows that general internship programmes were successful for both participants and organisations. A time-limited placement of interns in the organisation allowed students to apply their classroom learnings to the corporate world (Patil et al., 2020). General internship programmes have been an excellent opportunity for students to gain practical experience and expertise in their field of study. These experiences bridged the gap between academic education and actual work reality, allowing students to learn new skills and experiment in the field (Ivana, 2019; Pietersen & Mlatijie, 2022).

One of the most significant benefits of offering internships was the ability to pick and develop future talent (Mabeba, 2019). Employers tended to absorb eligible participants for hired full-time employment. Previous participants recruited as permanent employees adapted to their new responsibilities more quickly and had shorter learning curves than external hires (Mgaya & Mbekomize, 2014). The ability to participate in meaningful work assignments that allowed the intern to learn more about a vocation through practice by working closely with a mentor who took an active interest in giving direction and supervision was critical to a successful internship (Tito, 2023).

Career Development in South Africa.

The process of consistently improving individual abilities, expertise, experiences, and accomplishments in the workplace is referred to as career development. It involves a calculated strategy that blends organisational development objectives with personal

development plans (Mwangi, 2022). Career development assists employees in making career decisions by enabling them to assess their skills and identify future goals. Kappo-Abidemi et al., (2015) describe development as building on the knowledge and skills of employees to prepare them for new work challenges and responsibilities either for individual, organisation or the nation. It also helps organisations in retaining valuable assets and prepares employees for positions at the highest levels. Career development plans provide feedback, allowing policies and initiatives to be evaluated for success (Shaito, 2019). The associated variables of career development within the organisation are,

Career progression

Career progression refers to the advancement and growth within a chosen career. It involves moving from one role to another, often with increasing responsibilities, authority, and compensation (Bossou et al., 2019). Career progression refers to official and informal actions to develop positions and professionalism. The strategies, tools, procedures, and evaluation systems that facilitate individual human growth within any organisational setting can be referred to as career progression (Mackson & Bello, 2023; Anastasia, 2020). Employees today must balance their ambition for professional advancement with their views towards their existing organisations to succeed in their careers. According to Weng & Xi (2011), career advancement possibilities have been a major factor in employee-organisational connections. Organisations that have given channels for employee career development have fostered a mutual investment connection with their employees. For an organisation to show that it supports its employees' career progression, it should encourage their hiring, retention, and advancement (Njiru, 2014).

Career progression could be linear: moving to a higher position in the same or different organisation. It could be horizontal, moving from one position to the same position. This could occur usually when an employee gets a permanent offer from another organisation closely related to where they were during their internship programme (Rautio et al., 2023). South Africa has been distinguished by a scarcity of work possibilities and a fast-expanding labour force. The country's labour force has been struggling to be absorbed in the job market, let alone find solid and long-term employment, impeding potential economic growth and development (Mncayi & Shuping, 2020; Blinguat et al., 2021; Kappo-Abidemi & Ogunyemi, 2023). Absorption occurs if an internship programme participant, apprentice, or learner obtains a permanent position with the organisation where they completed their programme or with an industry entity (Koyana., et al., 2018).

Causes of graduate unemployment included a lack of employability skills, the quality of basic education, the quality of tertiary education, excessively high expectations, and work experience (Maka et al., 2021). Many university and college graduates were unemployed because they needed the credentials but did not have the necessary abilities to meet the nation's needs. A persistent pattern seemed to suggest that the underemployment continued to be caused by the mismatches between educational achievement and job requirements, which was a result of a lack of skill development in South Africa (Mhlanga et al., 2023). Internship programmes reduced the participants' career entry worries (Ebner et al., 2020). For several reasons, taking control over an uncertain future career through work experience in the form of an internship was highly recommended. First, the application procedure for an internship offered instruction on applying for the selected field of work and taught about the credentials and soft skills that hiring organisations wanted. Finally, each employment experience could be viewed as a chance to expand a person's knowledge, skills, and toolkit for solving problems. Internship programmes allowed participants to explore different aspects of their chosen field. The exploration could help them identify their strengths and interests, leading to more informed decisions about the direction to take in their career choice (Ismail, 2018).

Many organisations have used internships as a talent pipeline for full-time positions. Interns who performed well and demonstrated dedication were often considered for permanent roles within the same organisation. Internship experience could give participants a competitive edge during hiring (Agoston et al., 2017). Some internship programmes could have led to long-term relationships with the host organisation, whereby the candidates will be offered a full-time position after completing an internship (Pietersen & Mlatijie, 2022). It is important to note that the impact of an internship programme on career progression could have varied based on factors such as the quality of the internship programme, the participant's level of engagement and initiative, the industry, and the overall economic and job market conditions (Baert et al., 2021). A well-structured internship that aligned with the participant's career goals and was complemented by active learning and networking efforts could have significantly contributed to career progression. An internship programme that could lead to the career development and progression of participants should focus on the following:

Mentorship

Mentoring is a one-on-one interaction in which an experienced mentor helps a less experienced colleague develop professionally and personally. The primary goal is to acquire new abilities and become proficient in their role (Li & Li, 2023). Mentoring research has been conducted since the 1970s and 1980s, with formal mentoring partnerships beginning in the 1990s. Mentoring involves career mentoring and psychosocial mentoring. Both promote employee retention and success (Rohatinsky et al., 2020).

Mentorship is a workplace practice that provides possibilities for improving psychological and professional development assistance. Usually, studies on mentoring distinguish between two types of mentoring: formal and informal (McDonald & Wilson-Mah, 2020). This study defines mentoring as a type of social learning in a work-integrated situation. As a form of social learning, Mentorship serves the purpose of career development assistance to help the mentee grow within the organisation (McDonald & Wilson-Mah, 2020). It is important to note that a mentor also plays the supervisor role.

Mentoring is often regarded as a useful strategy for human resource development in cooperative enterprises. Numerous studies have found that formal and informal career mentoring connections in corporate settings favoured organisational engagement, job involvement, and turnover intention (Nkomo et al., 2018; Jain, 2020). In a workplace mentoring programme, mentors and mentees were paired to achieve encouraged learning, transfer of knowledge, personal and professional growth, and career progression (Weng et al., 2011). Mentorship within the organisation should be dedicated to guiding, supporting, and helping the participants learn during the programme. A mentor's willingness to provide guidance, evaluation, and offer feedback to the intern is crucial as it will undoubtedly take some time and effort on their part. A robust mentoring component is vital to a successful internship programme (Jain, 2020).

Networking

Participants should build valuable professional connections that could lead to future job opportunities (Akkas, 2023). Internship programmes enabled participants to create a professional network for their subsequent employment. Building a professional network influences career advancement, performance and professional development or refinement of learning goals (Lubega & Schultz, 2022). The participants can participate in meaningful work assignments that allow the intern to learn more about a career through practice by working closely with a mentor who provides guidance and supervision (Maertz et al., 2014). The benefits for the employer were the opportunities to pre-screen and recruit highly qualified and motivated students to meet the company's needs and provide the organisation with fresh ideas and insights. Ideally, an internship programme balanced the activities that provided a meaningful learning experience for the intern and the activities that would increase organisational productivity.

Research and Methodology

The study adopted a quantitative approach that systematically investigate phenomena by collecting numerical data and applying statistical, mathematical, or computational approaches (Olasile, 2020a). A self-developed research instrument with four Likert scales was used to collect relevant data from the municipality employees currently employed through an internship programme and employees who have been absorbed into a permanent position after completing the internship programme. The reliability of the self-developed research instrument was tested using Cronbach's alpha, and 0,856 was generated for internship programme-related questions and 0,530 for career progression-related questions. The moderate reliability value generated by career progression responses is acceptable, considering that the instrument was self-developed (Taber, 2018; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011; Bujang et al., 2018). Higher values indicated greater agreement among items and suggested that each participant's response values were consistent throughout a set of questions. When participants reacted highly to one of the items, they were likelier to respond to the others. This consistency showed that the measurements were accurate, and the items may measure the same properties (Abhayantha et al., 2023). Similarly, the degree to which a study measures what it promises to measure is referred to as construct validity. In other words, it evaluates how well a research instrument captures the idea or construct being studied. When planning and conducting the study, construct validity was used to establish the trustworthiness and legitimacy of the instrument (Guleryuz et al., 2023; Warren et al., 2018; Lac, 2016).

According to the annual report for 2021-22, the local municipality employs a total number of 1980. However, not all employees are eligible to participate in the study. Hence, a purposive non-probability sampling approach was adopted for this study. Convenience non-probability approaches were also adopted, whereby participants were approached based on their experience in internship programmes. The participants' availability and willingness to participate in the study were also considered (Vehovar et al., 2023). A non-probability sampling approach was also considered to have a quick and inexpensive response from the study population (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020). Due to the purposive nature of the sampling technique, 100 questionnaires were administered, and 70 useful responses were retrieved. The response rate is 70% of the targeted sample size and is statistically acceptable. The data was cleaned, coded and captured using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 28.

Findings and Discussion

The demographic data on research participants was essential to evaluate whether the persons in a specific study were a representative sample of the target population for generalisation purposes (Hammer, 2011). Gender, age, years of working experience, educational qualification and race were the demographic information explored in this study. The graph showed that 27 (38.6%) of the respondents were male and 43(61.4%) of respondents were female. Similarly, it was demonstrated that 1 (1.4%) was over the age of 20 years, 58 (82.9%) of the respondents were between the ages of 21 and 30 years, and 11 (15.7%) of the respondents were between 31 and 40 years. There were 24 (34.3%) of the respondents with less than one year of working experience, 35 (50.0%) of the respondents had 2-5 years of working experience, 7(10.0%) had 6-10 years of experience, 3 (4.3%) had 11-16 years of experience and 1(1.4%) had 17years of work experience.

Out of the total 70 respondents, 19 (27.1%) of the respondents have a diploma, bachelor's degree or Advanced Diploma held by 39 (55.7%), 10(14.3%) had an Honours Degree, and 2 (2.9%) had master's qualification. There was a total of 70 respondents. Sixty-five respondents identified as Black, making up the majority at 92.9%. 2 respondents identified as Indian, constituting 2.9%. Lastly, 3(4.3%) of the respondents were identified as Coloured, and most respondents were identified as black, 65 (92.9%). Smaller percentages were identified as Indian (2.9%) or Coloured.

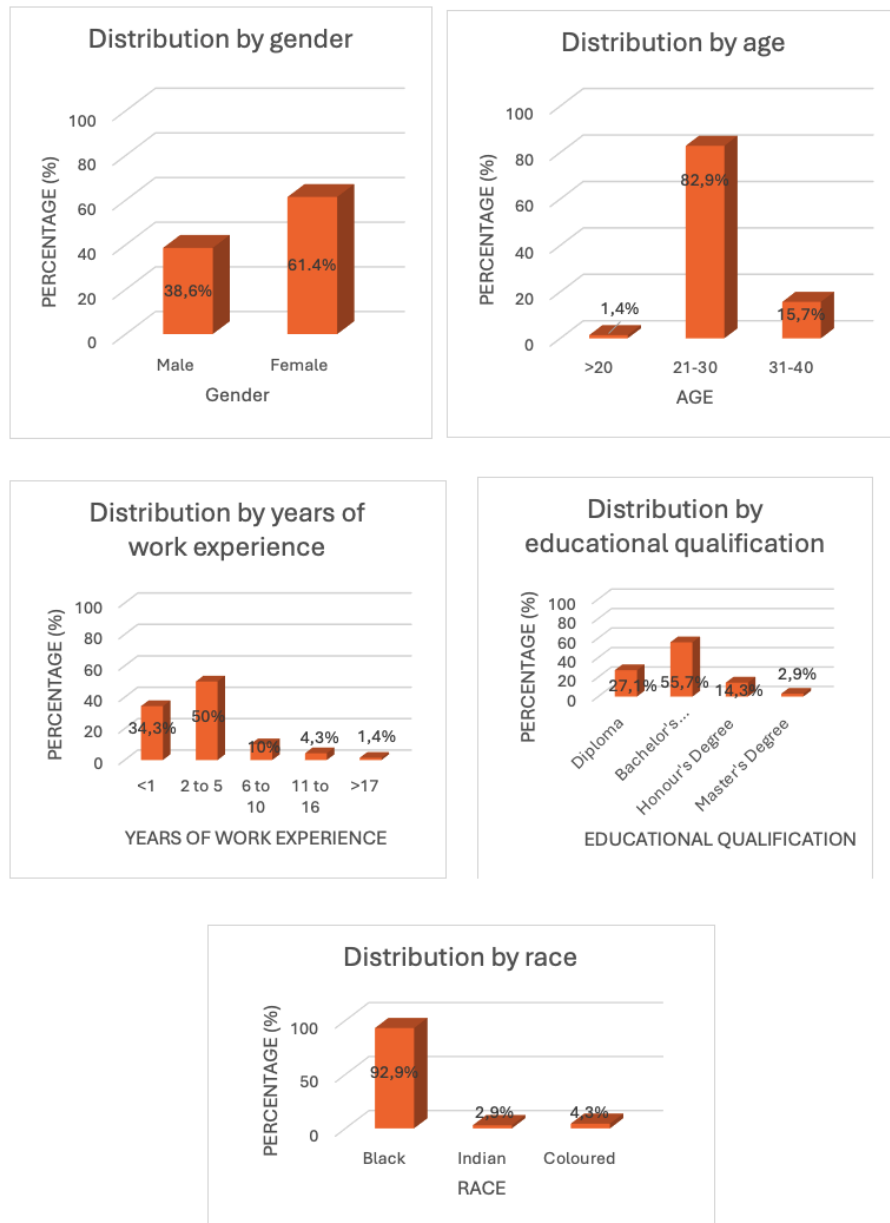


Figure 1: Graphical Illustration of Respondents' Demographic Characteristics

The statistical illustration of the study participant demographic information and response to the research questions is provided in Figure 1. The analysis further examines how the participants respond to the research questions. Furthermore, a descriptive analysis of participants' responses to the research questions was explored by examining the frequencies. Table 1 shows the frequencies of how study participants to each of the research items:

Table 1: Frequencies of Participants Response to Research Questions on Internship Programme and Career Progression

	Questionnaire Variables	Response categories obtained					
		Means	STD	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Agree (3)	Strongly Agree (4)
1	The internship programme is within the recommended duration of 3-12 months.	3.39	.906	5(7.1%)	5(7.1%)	18(25.7%)	42(60%)
2	My internship programme was extended for longer than the initial contract.	2.17	1.035	22(31.4%)	24(34.3%)	14(20%)	10(14.3)
3	The internship programme was part of the conditions to complete my academic qualification.	1.60	.493	28(40%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	42(60%)
4	The timeframe was enough to acquire the needed skills and knowledge.	3.09	.847	3(4.3%)	13(18.6%)	29(41.4%)	25(35.7%)
5	My working hours during the internship programme were stipulated in the contract.	3.23	.904	3(4.3%)	13(18.6%)	19(27.1%)	35(50%)
6	I was provided with learning opportunities related to my discipline during the internship programme.	3.23	.837	3(4.3%)	9(12.9%)	27(38.6%)	31(44.3%)
7	I was appointed a mentor during the internship programme.	3.26	.928	4(5.7%)	11(15.7%)	18(25.7%)	37(52.9%)
8	My mentor has the relevant understanding to mentor an internship candidate.	3.31	.894	5(7.1%)	5(7.1%)	23(32.9%)	37(52.9%)
9	My mentor has discipline knowledge that is relevant to mine.	3.30	.857	3(4.3%)	9(12.9%)	22(31.4%)	36(51.4%)
10	My mentor exposed me to lots of practical training during the internship.	3.44	.792	2(2.9%)	7(10%)	19(27.1%)	42(60%)
11	Most of the tasks my mentor gives me are aligned with what I studied.	3.14	.982	5(7.1%)	14(20%)	17(24.3%)	34(48.6%)
12	I have a good working relationship with my mentor.	3.49	.794	3(4.3%)	4(5.7%)	19(27.1%)	44(62.9%)
13	The experience is related to my major career field.	3.33	.880	3(4.3%)	10(14.3%)	18(25.7%)	39(55.7%)
14	The internship programme is clearly structured.	3.07	.997	5(7.1%)	17(24.3%)	16(22.9%)	32(45.7%)
15	The internship programme objectives are well communicated to all.	3.20	.942	5(7.1%)	10(14.3%)	21(30%)	34(48.6%)
16	The internship programme has helped me to develop skills and solve problems.	3.54	.652	1(1.4%)	2(2.9%)	26(37.1%)	41(58.8%)
17	I have gained useful skills from the internship programme.	3.59	.602	3(4.3%)	24(34.3%)	0(0%)	43(61.4%)

18	The internship programme has assisted me in developing professional competence.	3.53	.675	1(1.4%)	3(4.3%)	25(35.7%)	41(58.8%)
19	The host organisation provides opportunities for staff to advance to the next level.	3.24	4.885	3(4.3%)	28(40%)	27(38.6%)	12(17.1%)
20	The host organisation is an employer of choice.	2.71	.854	7(10%)	17(24.3%)	35(50%)	11(15.7%)
21	I received a retention offer while I was still busy with the internship programme.	2.00	.885	21(30%)	34(48.6%)	9(12.9%)	6(8.6%)
22	The training provided during the internship programme enables the participants to function within and outside the organisation.	2.86	.822	5(7.1%)	14(20%)	37(52.9%)	14(20%)
23	The host organisation provides training that contributes to the personal development of the internship candidates.	3.00	.933	6(8.6%)	11(15.7%)	31(44.3%)	22(31.4%)
24	I was given a temporary employment contract after my internship programme.	2.01	.955	24(34.3%)	28(40%)	11(15.7%)	7(10%)
25	The internship contract was extended due to the programme objectives not yet accomplished.	2.00	.963	24(34.3%)	30(42.9%)	8(11.4%)	8(11.4%)
26	I was absorbed by the host organisation because there was a skill shortage when my internship contract was about to end.	1.97	.978	26(37.1%)	28(40%)	8(11.4%)	8(11.4%)
27	I would love to be retained by the organisation where I did my internship programme.	3.13	.962	6(8.6%)	10(14.3%)	23(32.9%)	31(44.3%)
28	The organisation has a high retention rate for their internship candidates	2.43	.910	11(15.7%)	27(38.6%)	23(32.9%)	9(12.9%)
29	The experience I received during an internship programme has assisted me in getting my current job.	2.67	.944	8(11.4%)	22(31.4%)	25(35.7%)	15(21.4%)
30	The internship programme prepared me properly for the workplace.	3.13	.779	1(1.4%)	14(20%)	30(42.9%)	25(35.7%)
31	Completing the internship programme will help me qualify for any entry-level job position in my career field in terms of experience.	3.10	.819	2(2.9%)	14(20%)	29(41.4%)	25(35.7%)
32	The internship experience provided me with the basic workplace promotion requirements.	2.64	.885	7(10%)	23(32.9%)	28(40%)	12(17.1%)
33	My career path became clearer based on my internship experience	2.93	.937	7(10%)	12(17.1%)	30(42.9%)	21(30%)

34	The internship programme has made me change my career path.	2.69	4.868	21(30%)	28(40%)	11(15.7%)	10(14.3%)
35	I was encouraged to study further based on my internship experience.	2.99	.893	5(7.1%)	13(18.6%)	30(42.9%)	22(31.4%)
36	I realised that my qualifications are relevant to my dream career.	3.34	.657	7(10%)	32(45.7%)	0(0%)	31(44.3%)
37	After being exposed to the internship programme related to my initial academic qualification, I had to re-evaluate my career options.	2.40	.969	14(20%)	24(34.3%)	22(31.4%)	10(14.3%)
38	The internship programme has made me understand that this field of study is in high demand in the labour market.	3.11	.733	15(21.4%)	32(45.7%)	0(0%)	23(32%)

Research items 1-24 highlight the various participants' responses to the internship programme experience as well as the means score and the standard deviation, while questions 25-38 are the research items related to the career progression of the participants. Table 2 provides a Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient of the relationship between the study participants' internship programme experience and their career progression.

Table 2: Pearson Correlational Analysis of the Relationship between Internship Programmes and Career Progression

		Internship	Career Progression (CP)
Internship	Pearson Correlation	1	.474***
	Sig. (2-tailed)		>.001
	N	70	70
Career Progression (CP)	Pearson Correlation	.474**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	70	70

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient correlation was used to analyse the results, as shown in Table 2. The above were the findings of a Pearson correlation analysis between the two variables: internship programmes and career progression. The correlation coefficient between Internship programmes and Career Progression was 0.474, indicating a moderately good association between the two variables. Both correlations (Internship programmes with Career progression and Career progression with Internship programme) were statistically significant at the 0.01 level, indicating that the observed correlation coefficients were unlikely to have occurred by chance alone. Because the correlation was positive, it implied that while one variable (Internship Programme) changed, the other variable (Career Progression) tended to also change at a roughly linear pace. Therefore, there was a significant relationship between the internship programme and career progression, as shown in Table 1. The significant level was less than .001. This means that the null hypothesis, which states that there is no significant relationship between internship programmes and employee career progression, was rejected.

The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient result shows that internship programmes influence career progression. The programme causes improved employability and the development of their curriculum vitae (CV). Internship programmes give the participants' CV credibility and increase a participant's appeal to employers. Experience that uses real-world knowledge acquired from internships demonstrates a person's aptitude and dedication to the industry. Employability is a form of career advancement. Hence, if the internship programmes are not rolled out well and effectively, it can hinder an individual's career advancement (Rhemana, 2014). Many recent graduates find it challenging to secure graduate-level employment and break into their desired industries. Higher education institutions are addressing this by re-evaluating the strategies to improve students' employability after graduating and implementing a few initiatives to expand and fortify this activity, with a growing emphasis on work experience. Placements, or internships, are a common means of achieving this (Heyler et al., 2014). Career progression is influenced by several factors, such as education, experience, abilities, networking, and flexibility in response to shifting work demands. Internship programmes offer the experience needed for an individual to grow in their field and be employable (Francis, 2017).

Comprehending and fulfilling the competencies demanded by the business sector might be difficult. Employers today seek out talents beyond a degree in the current economic scenario. Graduates today not only require technical work experience to complete tasks, but they also fundamentally need to possess the employability skill set, which includes aptitude, communication, perspective, resolving issues and teamwork, among other things (Rhemana, 2014). This influences their career progression greatly in their chosen fields. Graduates from universities and other higher education institutions make up the bulk of the unemployed youth, and a lack of experience and work possibilities is one of the main culprits (Nkundabaramye, 2023).

Conclusion

The study was conducted to determine the relationship between internship programmes and the career progression of recipients in South Africa. With the adoption of the following hypothesis: H₀= There is no significant relationship between internship programmes and employee career progression and H₁: There is a significant relationship between internship programmes and employee career progression. The null hypothesis has been rejected as a positive relationship is presented between internship programme and career progression, as proven by the result generated by the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation. Internship programmes were introduced to reduce unemployment and provide fresh graduates with work experience. However, the internship programmes failed to reduce unemployment among graduates (Mohlokoana et al., 2023) in as much as the result has shown a positive relationship between the internship programme and the career progression of the recipient. The feasible reality has shown that the programme is not serving the purpose it was originally created to serve. Some participants get the experience and return to the unemployment pool when absorption and advancement do not occur (Mncayi & Shuping, 2020).

This study has established that the internship programme is significantly related to career progression. Therefore, internship programmes influence the career advancement of their participants and can be helpful for an individual to progress in the workplace. However, this finding is limited to the Mbombela local municipality as this study's participants are the municipality's employees. This is due to how experience is valued in the labour market. A person with zero experience is less likely to get hired than someone with experience. Internship programmes need to be managed to ensure that the participants get the kind of practical experience that matches their qualifications. Internship programmes can be an asset to an organisation that manages them effectively.

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