



National Professional Internship Programme (NPIP) for Higher Learning Institutions Graduates and Their Future Employment Opportunities: A Study from Rwanda Development Board (RDB)

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Abstract

It is evident throughout the literature that unemployment rate among the youth in Rwanda is alarming. The majority of the unemployed young people are the universities and higher learning institutions graduates and one of the root causes is attributed to the lack of job opportunities and experience. This paper therefore examines the contribution of national professional internship programme introduced by Rwanda Development Board (RDB) to the employment opportunities for graduates from higher learning education in Rwanda. The paper study mixed qualitative and quantitative methods with a target population of 2158 internees from whom a sample size of 95 respondents was selected. The questionnaire, documentation, and interview data collection techniques were used while collected data were analyzed using descriptive techniques such as frequency distribution and percentage. The study findings indicate that national professional internship enhances graduates' employable skills, work readiness, and competitive skills. National Professional Internship also exposes the graduates to the job market, enables them to gain working experience, and equips them with job-seeking skills. There is a need however for partnership with public and private institutions and to encourage graduates to undertake professional internship as one of the ways to land employment opportunities.

Subject Areas

Sociology

Keywords

Internship, Employability, Employment Opportunities, Professional Internship, Fresh Graduates, and Internship Programme

1. Introduction

Young people worldwide are capable of being productive members of society, but often lack access to decent job opportunities. According to the ILO (2022), for instance, the global youth unemployment rate is estimated at 15.6 per cent in 2021, more than three times the adult rate. Globally, in 2021 some 75 million young people were unemployed, 408 million were in employment, and 732 million were out of the labour force [1]. Difficulty in transitioning to the workforce can have long-lasting consequences not only for youth, but also for their families and communities (O'Higgins and Pinedo, 2018) [2].

The inability of fresh graduates to transition smoothly into employment is due to employers' high expectations for abilities such as communication, problem-solving, customer service, team-working, critical thinking, management, and leadership, as well as personal qualities such as punctuality, durability, and conduct in the workplace (Helyer and Lee, 2014) [3]. Graduates who fail to meet these standards face difficulties in finding employment, and higher education institutions (HEIs) have been criticized for not adequately preparing graduates for the labor market (Kalufya and Mwakajinga, 2016) [4]. Fortunately, experiential learning, such as internships, can provide graduates with the technical skills needed for job duties, and internship programs are structured to ensure that graduates are prepared for the labor market. Therefore, implementing internships is a feasible way for HEIs to help their students achieve positive post-graduate career outcomes (NACE, 2011) [5].

The Rwanda Development Board (RDB) defines an internship as a limited period opportunity for internees to work in their field of study at a company or organization. Professional internships are not part of an educational program, but rather an independent work experience aimed at facilitating the transition to the workforce for young people. The ultimate goal of professional internships is to enhance graduates' employability skills and professional experience for a seamless transition into the labor market (RDB, 2018) [6].

Youth National Internship Programme (YNIP) is the most important current scheme, which was introduced in 2009 by the RDB and is now implemented by the National Capacity Building Secretariat (NCBS). In the fiscal year 2013/14, 800 graduates were placed, with a target of 1100 placements set for 2014/15. However, the number of applications far exceeds the available internship places, and most internees are currently placed with public institutions. To foster cooperation with the private sector, NCBS and the Private Sector Federation (PSF) have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).

Furthermore, various programmes have been implemented in the past, targeting Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) graduates, but all these programs stopped when funding from development partners ended. Additionally, individual companies and training providers run considerable but unrecorded internship programs (Government of Rwanda, 2015) [7].

According to the Ministry of Public Service and Labor (MIFOTRA), graduates from universities and higher education institutions are rated the most unemployed people in Rwanda with 13% by 2017 (Taarifa, 2017) [8]. A recent survey conducted by the National Institute of Statistics Rwanda (NISR) shows that the unemployment rate among the youth has been relatively higher than the unemployment rate among adults over time. The unemployment rate among youth (16 - 30 years) is 25.5 percent in August 2021 (Q3) (NISR, 2020) [9]. The individuals aged between 16 and 30 years the majority of them are the graduates of university and one of the root causes is the lacking of job opportunities and experience. However, every year in Rwanda, tens of thousands of university students graduate. For example in 2021, at the University of Rwanda (UR) 8908 students graduated (Darius, 2021) [10] while, Institut Catholique de Kabgayi (ICK) graduated more than 500 students in 2022 (Akimana, 2022) [11].

Existing literature reveals various scholars who documented the internship and its implications. For instance, Hurst and Good (2010) [12] evaluated the evolutions of 20 years internship and its implications to internees, employers and educators; McHugh (2017) [13] focused on the impact of compensation, supervision and work design to the interns during the internship and revealed its importance to the interns in general and its future career; Sykes (2016) [14] assessed whether the graduates are prepared for employment with or without internship; Baron-Puda (2017) [15] assessed how internship programme should be improved and adopted to minimize the unemployment among the graduates; while Cerulli-harms (2017) [16] assessed the impact of the internship on the early labor market performance.

Notwithstanding growing pervasiveness of internships has not, as yet, been accompanied by much systematic research on the extent to which and under which conditions do professional internships programme provide an effective bridge to longer term stable employment. Despite the aforementioned scholarships and many existing others, this gives an impression that there is still a need for empirical researches on this subject matter. This also gives a profound foundation for the current study to examine the contribution of national professional internship programmes for higher learning institutions graduates to creating and finding new employment opportunities. The rest of this paper is organised as follows: Section 2 deals with literature review, Section 3 addresses methodology employed, Section 4 presents and discusses the findings and Section 5 deals with conclusions and recommendations.

2. Literature Review

This section reviews existing literature pertaining to internship programmes and

their contribution in creating employment opportunities in form of conceptual, theoretical, and empirical reviews.

2.1. Conceptual Review

For Koc *et al.* (2019) [17] cited by (Thiyazan and Kamal, 2021) [18] internship can be defined as a one-time service experience or work related to the main objective or career of the student, (Mohua, 2018) [19] defined internships as a chance to mix an undergraduate education with career experience by engaging in scheduled and supervised work. While, for Hoy (2011) [20] internships can be regarded as the cooperation of activities associated with work and educational qualifications.

Internship programmes have long been regarded as an important addition to undergraduate education, and they play a fundamental role in preparing students for their future careers. Therefore, it is imperative that institutions and retail employers continue to evaluate the type of internship programmes they have established and the types of interns they are cultivating (Hurst and Good, 2010) [12].

There exist numerous studies including those of Clark (2003) [21], Cook, Parker, and Pettijohn (2004) [22], Knouse and Fontenot (2008) [23]; Moghadam (2011) [24]; Perez (2001) [25]; and Young, Wright, and Stein (2006) [26] proving that internship programmes are beneficial for internees in terms of interpersonal skills, improving career path, job probability, marketability, leadership, work readiness, and applying classroom theories in a business environment.

Internships as work-based learning enable students to participate in skills competition, co-operative education and job shadowing (Nicholas *et al.*, 2015) [27]. Students who attended actively internship programmes are able to apply basic academic skills and know the professional skills that are expected by employers. At the same time, these students have positive attitude toward work and they are more willing to take responsibility for the job done (Kapareliotis *et al.*, 2019) [28].

The new graduates' success in the workplace does not depend only on their theoretical knowledge gained through formal educational process, but also on specific competencies that students could gain through working-based learning. There are five highest-ranking competencies (soft skills) that are necessary for success in business environment namely, ability and willingness to learn, teamwork and cooperation, hardworking and willingness to take on extra work, self-control and analytical thinking. These competencies could be developed only if universities work together with real sector to develop workplace-oriented programmes (Pang *et al.*, 2019) [29]. When students experience the theoretical knowledge in real working system, they realize the real benefit of learning process and the applicability of teaching materials. In the end, students assess the learning through practical experience very positively (Renganathan *et al.*, 2012) [30]. During the internship program, students develop a comprehensive

understanding of how to apply theoretical knowledge to solve practical problems (Ramsgaard and Østergaard, 2018) [31].

2.2. Theoretical Review

Under theoretical literature, human capital theory and scientific theory of management are reviewed in line with professional internship programme and employment opportunities for the fresh graduates.

2.2.1. Human Capital Theory

Prior to 1958, “human capital” was little more than a suggestive phrase in economics, and played no role in discussions of education policy (Holden and Biddle, 2017) [32]. In beginning his article in 1960 titled “Capital Formation by Education” Theodore Schultz writes: I propose to treat education as an investment in man and to treat its consequences as a form of capital. Since education becomes a part of the person receiving it, I shall refer to it as human capital (Holden and Biddle, 2017) [32].

With the emergence of the knowledge-based economy, organizations put a heavy emphasis on scarce resources and knowledge supply in order to increase organization, competitive advantage, and organizational effectiveness (Debrulle and Maes, 2014) [33]. Knowledge, skills, and abilities are viewed as an invisible asset seen as a tool for sustainable organization (Itami & Roehl, 1987 [34]; Snell *et al.*, 1996 [35]; Wright *et al.*, 2001 [36]); continuous education and training as well as the rapidly changing trends of the global technology, for maintaining competitiveness of organization. To retain a high standard of living knowledge, skill building, and training levels of the workforce must be upgraded (McConnell and Bruce, 2017) [37].

In the world of labor market, people bring different levels of education, knowledge, skill, and abilities as well as their expectancy to the workplace. According to McConnell and Bruce (2017) [37]: “a more educated, better-trained person is capable of supplying a larger amount of useful productive effort than one with less education and training.” The value of human capital theory is widely accepted in order to increase organizational performance, so an organization relies on employees’ skill, knowledge, ability as a key concept of value creation.

As Davenport (1999) [38] cited by (Wuttaphan, 2017) [39] advanced that “the component of human capital consisted of abilities, knowledge, skill, personal talent, behavior, and effort, when those three components plus time”, he extended that 1) the knowledge included Intelligence Quotient (IQ), specific and general knowledge to work. 2) Skill is expertise used in working, including the physical body, and movement of the job. 3) Talent is a personal characteristic which is innate and can be improved by development. 4) Behavior is an expression and observable behavior, norm, ethics and personal belief. 5) Effort is when people tries to use their innate or personal resources including their talent, experience, knowledge and ability to work to be successful, and finally there is time.

Becker (1964) [40] indicates that human capital can be accumulated in different forms of education, training, migration, and health. Through such forms, employees gain knowledge, skills and abilities in different ways. Firms invest in human capital because these firm view humans as an asset and expect that what the firm has invested will be returned and provide a positive value in the future. In other words, an individual investment in their schooling or training and anticipate that the knowledge, skill earned will be enhanced to their career advancement.

Human capital theory has been considered as one of the economics theories of Human Resource Development (HRD). Swanson (1999) [41] stated that “because performance improvement takes place in organizations that are economic entities, Performance Improvement (PI) must call upon economic theory at its core. In addition, management theories and methods should be properly viewed as useful derivatives of economic theory”. Human Capital Theory can improve a firm’s performance and explain the significance of labor maximization and how an organization can accumulate employees’ knowledge, skill, and ability by investing in humans through training, educating to enhance an employee’s capacity to work effectively.

This theory is directly linked to the improvement of skills, ability, and capability and hence having applicability to this study. Contextually, in a more thorough way, human development theory considers the improvement of human capital in form of skills, knowledge, and ability that hence sharpen their capabilities through training, education, internship, career exploration, and mentorship. Professional internship as one of the ways to develop employable human capital resources, should be taken as a prerequisite for graduates with full package of theoretical knowledge and little practical knowledge and little or no experience to find or create employment opportunities by equipping them with necessary or basic employable skills and knowledge.

2.2.2. The Scientific Theory of Management

The major objectives of Scientific Management Theory by Taylor (1911) are a maximum improvement of workers. This improvement shows on efficiency and effectiveness performance. Such development is the revolution in management procedure and employee’s actual performance.

If the procedures and principles of scientific management theory by Taylor apply, it can huge change on the things such as preventing the wastage of time; reducing the cost of production; securing the labor in industry; increasing the efficiency of the workers; and, developing the relationship between workers and managers (Taylor, 1911) [42].

During the later nineteenth century, Taylor (1856-1915), an American mechanical engineer, determined by means of an experiment that the classical institutions had many shortcomings (Harmon and Mayer, 1986) [43]. Institutional inefficiency, as well as unstructured compilation, were particularly prevalent. Taylor believed that better working methods would lead to increased productiv-

ity. In other words, he worked hard to improve organizational efficiency. Taylor's perspectives gained speed and acceptance, and it was later dubbed scientific management theory.

This theory posits that the recruitment of the personnel should be based on their expertise and capabilities to assure the recruitment of right personnel with high skills and capabilities. Scientific theory of management, hence, is applicable to this study to shape the understanding on the role of professional internship in developing employable graduates. This originates from the facts that professional internship is actually expected of equipping graduates with needed employability skills and capabilities that can help them create or find employment opportunities and stand stronger not only on labour market but also in the workplace.

2.3. Empirical Review

One way that HEIs can help students gain valuable experience and improve their employability is through internships. Several studies have shown a clear positive relationship between internship programmes and employability. Meththananda *et al.* (2018) [44] found that the dimensions of technical skills, soft skills, and career skills developed through internship programmes are closely related to graduate employability. Kapareliotis *et al.* (2019) [28] also found that students who attend internship programmes are more likely to be work-ready, possessing the skills required by employers and placing greater importance on intrinsic rewards.

Moreover, internships have been shown to benefit students, employers, and society as a whole in a number of ways. From the students' perspective, internships provide them with real-world job experience and help them develop employability skills that are highly regarded by employers (Yang, Cheung, and Song, 2016) [45]. They also give students an overview of the work environment, which can be helpful in their career choices (Chan *et al.*, 2020) [46]. From the employers' perspective, internships can be an effective way to find talented individuals who may help grow their companies and overcome unemployment issues (Mabiza, Mahlalela, and Mbohwa, 2017) [47].

Several studies have also shown that internships can lead to better job outcomes for students. Nunley *et al.* (2016) [48] found that internship experience increases the interview-request rate by about 14 percent and that the returns to internship experience are larger for non-business majors than for business majors. Cook, Parker, and Pettijohn's (2004) [22] in their longitudinal study found that interns reported improved general ability to get along with people in work situations, greater confidence in finding a job upon graduation, and increased likelihood of influencing future career choices. Similarly, Knouse and Fontenot (2008) [23] identified that students who participate in internships benefit from increased chances of finding jobs and being offered full-time positions by the companies that hire them as interns.

Internships play generally a crucial role in improving graduate employability and make them successful into the workforce. Internships provide students with the skills and experience required by employers, improve their career prospects, and help them clarify their career goals. Internships also benefit employers by providing them with a pipeline of talented candidates, and society as a whole by addressing unemployment issues.

3. Methodology

This section discusses the techniques adopted such as research design, approach, population, sampling, data collection and analysis methods to conduct the study.

3.1. Research Design, Population, Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

This study was conducted in Rwanda, a country located in central Africa surrounded by the Democratic Republic of Congo in the West, the Republic of Burundi in the South, the Republic of Uganda in the North and the Federal Republic of Tanzania in the East. The study employed descriptive research design with mixed approach (qualitative and quantitative) to understand the contribution of National Professional Programme introduced by the RDB to the employability of HEIs graduates.

The study targeted 2158 HEIs graduates who are still or have been internees under the national professional internship programme for the period 2016-2021. Yamane (1967) [49] formula for sample size determination was applied as shown below:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

whereby, n = sample size; N = target population and e = margin error, which is equal to 10% (0.1) in this case.

$$n = \frac{2158}{1 + 2158(0.1)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{2158}{22.58} = 95.57;$$

Sample size is 95. In terms of sampling techniques, simple random technique was used whereby every individual had an equal chance of being selected. This is due to the fact that every individual among the target population is knowledgeable enough about the professional internship under the National Professional Internship Programme.

3.2. Data Collection Instruments, Validity and Reliability

Data were collected using questionnaire composed of closed questions administered to the respondents using online mode as an approach of reaching a big number of respondents in a short period of time. Interviews with key partici-

pants were also conducted. Documentation was also used to enable gathering and make use of various specialized reports, and other scientific works.

In order to ensure the questionnaire's validity, a pilot study with a small number of internees under the NPIP and some staff in the implementation of the programme was conducted. Identical questions were repeatedly asked during the interview but in a different context. For testing internal consistency reliability, Cronbach's α has been calculated using the questionnaire's items. The result was found to be equal to 0.769 (see **Table 1**). This is therefore acceptable as recommended by George and Mallery (2003) [50].

3.3. Data Processing and Analysis Methods

After collecting data from the field, data were processed through editing, coding and tabulating before embarking on the analysis. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency distribution, and percentage to summarise data that describe the variables of the study in Tables. Qualitative data collected from interview were narratively analyzed to supplement and give more insights on the findings.

4. Results and Discussions

This section presents and discusses the results of this study which consist of the extent to which the NPIP contributes to the enhancement of work readiness and employability skills, employment connectivity and opportunities of the fresh graduates from various HLIs. Before presenting such results however, the demographic characteristics of the respondents are discussed.

4.1. Demographic Identification of the Respondents

The demographic characteristics of the respondents contain important information which have something to do with their opinions as well as experience. **Table 2** provides a summary of such characteristics in terms of age, sex, marital and disability status.

As shown in **Table 2**, all the respondents are aged above 20. However, the majority (about 98%) are between 21 and 35 years old. Only 2.1% of all respondents are aged above 35. This implies that all those who participate in professional internship programme are in the working age. **Table 2** also reveals that both males and females participated in the professional internship programme though males dominate with 55% compared to 45% of females.

Table 1. Test for internal consistency reliability.

Items	Cronbach's α	Number of items
Items capturing the extent to which NPIP contributes to the employability of the universities fresh graduates in Rwanda	0.769	5

Source: Field data, 2022.

Table 2. Age, sex, marital and disability status of the respondents.

	Items	N	Percent (%)
Age	20 - 25	45	47.4
	26 - 30	35	36.8
	31 - 35	13	13.7
	Above 35	2	2.1
	Total	95	100.0
Sex	Male	52	55
	Female	43	45
	Total	95	100.0
Marital status	Single	59	62.1
	Married	35	36.8
	Divorced	1	1.1
	Total	95	100.0
Disability status	Yes	5	5.3
	No	90	94.7
	Total	95	100.0

Source: Field data, 2022.

Table 2 also indicates that 62.1% of all respondents are single while 36.8% and 1.05% are respectively married and divorced. This shows that the majority of those who participate in the professional internship program are single and this is not surprising as 84.1% of all the respondents are young with 47.3% aged between 20 and 25 and 36.8% aged between 26 and 30. In addition, **Table 2** reveals that few participants (5.3% of respondents) in the professional internship programme have some disabilities. This implies that the professional internship programme is inclusive.

Table 3 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the respondents in terms of educational background information such as education level, Alma mater, University grade and year of graduation of the respondents.

The results in **Table 3** show that the respondents possessing diploma are 26.3%, Bachelor's degree are 71.5%, and Master's degree are 2.1%. Regarding Alma mater, the results indicate that those in professional internship programme are from various HLIs such as the University of Rwanda (UR), Kigali Independent University ULK, Integrated Polytechnic Regional College (IPRC), University of Tourism, Technology and Business Studies (UTB), Adventist University of Central Africa (AUCA), University of Lay Adventists of Kigali (UNILAK), Institut Catholique de Kabgayi (ICK), AKilah/Davis College, Mount Kenya University (MKU), and University of Kigali (UoK). However, the majority are from University of Rwanda, Kigali Independent University ULK, and Integrated Polytechnic Regional Colleges (IPRCs) with 28.4%; 26.3%; and 15.7% respectively.

Table 3. Educational background of the respondents.

	Items	N	Percent (%)	
Level of Education	Diploma	25	26.3	
	Bachelor's Degree	68	71.6	
	Master's Degree	2	2.1	
	Total	95	100.0	
Alma mater	University of Rwanda	27	28.4	
	Kigali independent university ULK	25	26.3	
	Integrated Polytechnic Regional College	15	15.8	
	University of Tourism, Technology and Business Studies	5	5.3	
	Adventist University of Central Africa (AUCA)	3	3.1	
	University of Lay Adventists of Kigali (UNILAK)	5	5.3	
	Institut Catholique de Kabgayi	2	2.1	
	Akilah/Davis College	5	5.3	
	Mount Kenya University MKU	1	1.1	
	University of Kigali	7	7.3	
	Total	95	100.0	
	University Grade	First class	7	7.4
		Second class, Upper Division	63	66.3
Second class, Lower Division		25	26.3	
Total		95	100.0	
Year of Graduation	2017	6	6.3	
	2018	12	12.6	
	2019	26	27.4	
	2020	34	35.8	
	2021	17	17.9	
	Total	95	100.0	

Source: Field data, 2022.

This indicates that both private and public universities are represented in the national professional internship programme.

In terms of grades, 7.3% have First Class, 66.3% have Second Class, Upper Division and 26.3% have Second Class, Lower Division. The respondents also showed that they have graduated in different years between 2017 and 2021 whereby, 6.3% graduated in 2017; 12.6% in 2018; 27.3% in 2019; 35.8% in 2020; and 17.9% in 2021. However, the graduates who are admitted to the national professional internship programme have various areas of studies. **Table 4** summarises the statistics according to their areas of studies.

Table 4. Areas of study of the respondents.

Area of study	N	Percent (%)
1. Economics	14	14.7
2. IT	19	20.0
3. Law	17	17.9
4. BIT	3	3.1
5. Social Science	7	7.3
6. Accounting	5	5.2
7. Computer science	3	3.1
8. Tourism and Hospitality Management	8	8.4
9. Education	2	2.1
10. Information system	1	1.1
11. Media and journalism	2	2.1
12. Civil engineering	2	2.1
13. Public relation	1	1.1
14. Finance	1	1.1
15. Agro-Business	2	2.1
16. Business administration	1	1.1
17. Land survey	1	1.1
18. Electricity	1	1.1
19. Food processing	1	1.1
20. Business management	1	1.1
21. Project management	1	1.1
22. Food and science technology	1	1.1
23. International business and trade	1	1.1
Total	95	100.0

Source: Field data, 2022.

Table 4 shows the various areas of study are represented under the National Professional Internship Programme (NPIP). However, the areas such as Economics, IT and Law have great shares in the NPIP compared to the other areas of studies. They occupy 14.7%; 20%; and 17.9% of the respondents respectively. On the other hand, the areas such as information system, public relations, finance, agro-business, business administration, land survey, food processing, business management, project management, food and science technology, and international business and trade are each represented by 1.1% of the respondents. The officials in charge of the NPIP at Rwanda Development Board (RDB) show that the unbalanced statistics of the applicants in various areas of study is caused by the limited available internship vacant posts in some areas. The graduates conduct internship under the NPIP in various institutions as presented in **Table 5**.

Table 5. The institution the respondents carry the professional internship.

Institution	N	Percent (%)
1. RDB	16	16.8
2. RBC	13	13.6
3. MINAGRI	6	6.3
4. MINEDUC	5	5.2
5. District Office	9	9.4
6. Procurement Office	4	4.2
7. HEC	5	5.2
8. Marriot Hotel	2	2.1
9. Supreme court	4	4.2
10. MINECOFIN	4	4.2
11. RRA	2	2.1
12. RMB	2	2.1
13. Secondary	2	2.1
14. MINEMA	1	1.1
15. Gasabo 3D	1	1.1
16. Province Office	1	1.1
17. CHUK	1	1.1
18. NESAS	1	1.1
19. RSSB	1	1.1
20. REMA	1	1.1
21. MINIFRA	1	1.1
22. MINUBUMWE	1	1.1
23. UR	1	1.1
24. 250 Start Up Incubation Center	1	1.1
25. NPPA	6	6.3
26. NAEB	4	4.2
Total	95	100.0

Source: Field data, 2022.

Table 5 indicates that the top institutions in admitting the internees under the NPIP are RDB (16.8%), RBC (13.6%), Districts offices (9.4%), and MINAGRI (6.3%) and NPPA (6.3%). Institutions such as MINEMA, Gasabo 3D, CHUK, NESAS, RSSB, REMA, MININFRA, MINUBUMWE, UR, and 250 Start Up Incubation Center have each admitted one internee (1.1%). These results indicate that few private institutions participate in the NPIP. Furthermore, the duration of internship programme is either for 6 months or 12 months as summarised in **Table 6**.

According to **Table 6**, those who did internship for a period less than 6 months

Table 6. Duration of internship.

Duration of internship	N	Percent (%)
Less than 6 months	4	4.2
Between 6 and 12 months	91	95.8
Total	95	100.0

Source: Field Data, 2022.

are 4.2% and those who did internship for a period between 6 and 12 months are 95.7%. It is however evident that the majority of the respondents did internship under the NPIP for a period between 6 and 12 months. This can be caused by the fact that the NPIP is designed for 6 months with the possibility of extension or job opportunities beforehand.

4.2. NPIP and Internees' Work Readiness and Employability Skills Enhancement

In order to understand the extent to which the NPIP enhances the internees' work readiness and employability skills, necessary information on the perceptions of internees was gathered using a questionnaire made of five-point Likert scale items distributed to the fresh graduates from various HLIs who are either currently doing or already completed professional internship. **Table 7** provides a summary of the results.

According to **Table 7**, the internees rated their perceptions on various skills acquired from the internship under the NPIP. Such skills include interpersonal and teamwork, sector-specific, communication, computer, ability to adapt and act in a new environment, reading and writing, analytical and problem-solving, planning and organization, decision-making, language, presentation, research skills, job acquisition, personal characteristics and attitudes and master academic skills. The results indicate that the majority of the respondents rated very high and high respectively the skills gained from internship under the NPIP. Only two skills were rated by the respondents as very low. These are interpersonal and teamwork skills and sector-specific skills rated respectively very low by 3% and 2% of the respondents.

These results are consistent with existing empirical literature that the internship provides students with an opportunity to acquire research and professional skills and new understanding of theoretical knowledge (Hynie *et al.*, 2011) [51]. In addition, Kohlmeyer *et al.* (2017) [52] state that internship programmes benefit graduates in a number of ways such as job-related benefits (acquiring professional skills and work experience), career-related benefits (career development support, social support and role modelling), and networking/job market benefits (creating links and network with other people in the business world).

The results of this study imply that professional internship under the NPIP has been beneficial to the internees and contributed to a large extent to the enhancement of their work readiness and employability skills. This is also emphasized

Table 7. Work readiness skills enhancement.

Item	Very High	High	Moderate	Low	Very Low
Interpersonal and teamwork skills	32	38	23	4	3
Sector-specific skills	26	51	19	2	2
Communication skills	39	49	11	-	-
Computer skills	31	58	11	-	-
Ability to adapt and act in a new environment	40	51	10	-	-
Good reading and writing skills	40	47	10	3	-
Analytical and problem-solving skills	38	53	10	-	-
Planning and organization skills	31	53	13	3	-
Decision-making skills	31	39	18	12	-
Language skills	33	57	6	3	-
Presentation skills	37	51	13	-	-
Research skills	29	62	8	1	-
Job acquisition skills	37	54	9	1	-
Personal characteristics and attitudes	29	52	19	-	-
Master academic skills	31	59	6	3	-

Source: Field data, 2022.

by the information collected from the interview with the internees who focused on the rationale and benefits of the professional internship under the NPIP.

In terms of practical professional skills, for instance, one of the interviewees said: *“During the internship I was assigned with taking the weekly meeting minutes. Even though I had educational background in language I was not familiar with taking the professional minutes. In the end, I learnt from my mistakes and I can tell you that I am currently well equipped with necessary professional meeting minutes taking skills.”* This supports existing literature that internship gives young candidates the opportunity to practice their theoretical knowledge and develop their skills and experiences within the sector (Bogdana, Mihaela and Anca-Ioana, 2012) [53]. Similarly, Pang et al. (2019) [29] added that the new graduates’ success in the workplace does not depend only on their theoretical knowledge gained through formal educational process, but also on specific competencies that students could gain through working-based learning.

In addition, the professional internship helped the internees acquiring decision making skills and presentation skills. One interviewee testified that *“As an internee with less confidence and working experience, the decisions I had to make were minor but at the end of the internship, my experience and confidence was somehow improved, and hence decision-making skills was also improved.”* Another interviewee said: *“Before professional internship, I was not aware of how to write a well-presented CV and lack employable skills required in the*

workplace as well as ethical values. However, the internship linked me to experienced people who helped me to acquire the skills I was missing and I am currently employed. Thanks to the internship, the skills acquired still help me to perform well in my duties.”

In relation these results, D’Abate, Youndt and Wenzel (2009) [54] stressed that internship provides learning opportunities, opportunities for career development, support from on-site supervisors and co-workers, organizational satisfaction and opportunities to form networks. Accordingly, Jawabri (2017) [55] points out that these factors help the internees in forming supportive relationships with co-workers and thus contribute to the level of satisfaction.

4.3. The NPIP and Employment Opportunities

One of the expected benefits of the NPIP is opening the doors for employment opportunities to the HLIs fresh graduates. In order to know whether the NPIP opens the doors for employment opportunities to graduates, necessary information was gathered and analysed to know their employment status after internship as presented in **Table 8**.

Refer to **Table 8**, it is evident that the majority of respondents manage to find or create employment opportunities after the internship under the NPIP. More specifically, 30.5% are employed in various organisations and 7.4% have managed to create their jobs and they are now self-employed. However, 27.4% are still unemployed though they completed internship under the NPIP, and, 34.7% are yet to complete their internship. In general, more than one third of the respondents employed after internship either by landing employment opportunities or creating their own employments. The results therefore imply that there is a probability of getting employed after completing professional internship. In line with the findings, Nunley *et al.*, (2016) [48]; Silva *et al.* (2016) [56]; Saniter and Siedler (2014) [57]; Binder *et al.*, (2015) [58] cited by Chen *et al.* (2020) [59] found that students who listed an internship on their resume received 14% more offers for an interview than those who did not and students who had an internship have 15% lower unemployment, 6% higher wages five years after graduation and final year grades that are 3.4% higher than those who did not have an internship

Furthermore, there is a need to assess whether there is a linkage between professional internship under the NPIP and graduates’ employment opportunities after internship. To understand such a linkage, various channels by which the graduates can get employment during or after professional internship were considered using data collected from those who managed to find or create employment opportunities after internship as presented in **Table 9**.

Regarding the linkage of the graduates’ professional internship to the employment opportunities, **Table 9** clearly indicates that there is a linkage between internship and employment opportunities. Out of 95 respondents who participated in the study, 36 managed to land a job opportunity after internship; and

Table 8. Employment status after completing internship.

Occupation	N	Percent (%)
Employed	29	30.5
Self-employed	7	7.4
Unemployed	26	27.4
Still doing internship	33	34.7
Total	95	100.0

Source: Field Data, 2022.

Table 9. Linkage between the NPIP and internees' employment opportunities.

Statement	N	Percent (%)
1. Internees working at the organizations where they completed internship	2	5.6
2. Internees who land jobs as a result of internship connections	7	19.4
3. Internees hired after the internship supervisor's recommendation	5	13.9
4. The internees employed due to experience gained in the internship	18	50
5. Internees got a job not linked to the internship	4	11.1
Total	36	100.0

Source: Field data, 2022.

5.6% of them got the employment in the organisations where they complete internship, 19.4% landed jobs as a result of internship connection, 13.9% got hired after internship supervisor's recommendation, and 50% got employed due to experience gained from internship. However, only 11.1% got a job not linked to the internship. These findings give an impression that the internship does not only open the doors for employment opportunities to the graduates in the organisations where they conduct internship but also link them to other organisations through recommendations, connections and experience gained. These results support existing findings that students benefit from internship programmes by having working experience (Biškupec and Herman 2019) [60], which can be described as "practicum", "gap-year", "internship", "cooperative educational experience" or "work-integrated learning" (Martin *et al.*, 2012) [61] cited by (Pang *et al.*, 2019) [29].

This is also supported by the testimonies from interviewees who stressed on the positive outcomes of professional internship in finding or creating employment opportunities. One of the interviewees who got a job from the connection gained during the period of professional internship said: "*One evening, the institution in which I conducted professional internship organized a workshop whereby employers from other organisations were invited. In that workshop, I had a chance to make a short presentation related to my duties. After the work-*

shop, I get called for exchange by one of the employers from other organizations who was convinced by presentation and that is how I got a job in his organisation.” This implies that professional internship exposes the internees to the job market by linking them to other employers. In line with this, existing literature shows that students who did internship are immersed in a work environment, arranged or endorsed by their university, to experience the routines of employment (Pang et al., 2019) [29].

Another interviewee who is now self-employed testified that the idea of creating her own job was from the experience gained from professional internship. She said: *“When I was doing professional internship, I did become aware of the societal issues that I was not aware of before. In the sake of finding solutions to those issues, I did manage to transform such issues into opportunities which led me to the creation of my own business. I am now an owner of a business.”* This implies that professional internship can enable internees to create their own jobs. This is also confirmed by existing literature which shows that professional internships can have a positive impact on entrepreneurial intentions and self-efficacy among students (Botha and Bignotti, 2016 [62]; Yi, 2018) [63]. Professional internships also enhance entrepreneurial intent and self-efficacy among tertiary-level entrepreneurship education students (Botha and Bignotti, 2016) [62].

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This section provides the conclusions and recommendations based on the findings of the study.

5.1. Conclusions

The study assessed the contribution of the national professional internship programme for higher learning students to their future employment opportunities in Rwanda. The study solely targeted the higher learning institutions graduates that had conducted professional internship under the national professional internship programme, implemented and coordinated by the RDB. From the internees’ perceptions, the study found that professional internship provides internees with skills needed on labour market namely interpersonal and team work skills, sector-specific skills, communication skills, computer skills, ability to adapt and act in a new environment, good reading and writing skills, planning and organization skills, decision making skills, language skills, presentation skills, research skills, job acquisition skills amongst others.

Regarding output and outcome of professional internship, the results of the study indicate that professional internship linked internees to employment opportunities in number of ways namely through connections gained during internship, internship supervisors’ recommendations, and experience and job seeking skills gained from internship. This study therefore emphasizes and contextualizes the importance of professional internship to fresh graduates’ profes-

sional career building.

5.2. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1) There is need for the government to establish permanent task force to oversee and facilitating professional internship programme implementation. This will help in coordination of partnerships through public-private institutions partnership in this area and raise public awareness of the importance of professional internship.

2) The government through RDB should structure Professional internship programme in the manner that it can accommodate and benefit as many as possible graduates who can apply for it. In addition, it should be structured in the manner that it provides a motivation to internees.

3) The internees should actively participate in the Professional internship programme to benefit from the benefits package offered in order to increase their chance to land job opportunities.

4) This study focused on the contribution of professional internship under the national professional internship programme coordinated by RDB to the employment prospect of the fresh graduate. There is therefore a need for further researchers to conduct similar studies on professional internship schemes offered by other organisations to diversify the findings of this study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that no conflicts of interest exist.

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