

Development of Researchers in the HSRC: *The case of internship programme*
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Abstract

This paper is derived from a short survey carried out within the HSRC on the experiences of different research programmes on Internships. This survey targeted interns, mentors and other senior researchers. The purpose of this study was to solicit information and stimulate discussion on how best the HSRC could improve its internship programme to ensure that optimum transfer of skills takes place with the highest efficiency possible; to also contribute towards the national skills development agenda. It is embodied in the argument of this paper that, if internship programmes are to make any significant impact both to the interest of HSRC and the personal development of the intern, the programmes have to be well structured, even if they are programme or project-oriented. This argument is based on the fact that unstructured and or unorganised internships make interns more vulnerable to only doing the mundane activities and not engaging in the process of developing valuable skills to enable them to become valuable researchers who could drive social science research agenda that makes a difference.

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Introduction

Whereas there appears to be progress in breaking the racial divide in the labour market, the legacy of apartheid is still prevalent in other areas of importance to our society. This includes among others the area of knowledge production and research. Buhlungu and Metcalfe (2001) clearly depict this as the area that is still white dominated with blacks only in the peripheral sides. Thus it has become a serious challenge and a quagmire for institutions of higher learning and research organisations (HSRC included) to work towards addressing these imbalances. If not attended, it will continue to prevail and it is something South Africa cannot afford to do.

In an attempt to address this legacy, the government, private sector and many of the research organisations are engaged in programmes geared towards capacitating the previously disadvantaged groups. Generally, on the part of the government, this has become evident through the adoption of the Skills Development Act 9 of 1999 and the Employment Equity Act. The establishment of SETAs, Learnerships in the workplace and adoption of affirmative action policy have also come about as a result of these processes. Unfortunately, this alone cannot achieve miracles without the commitment of the knowledge producers and organisations themselves. There is a need for the organisations to understand these policies as social imperatives given the political history of our country.

Le Roux (2002) explicitly elucidates that “companies who understand employment equity not as a political requirement but as a demographic imperative for them to have highly skilled employees 10 years from now, have active development programmes for selecting star students from educational institutions, they sponsor them, and develop an active mentoring relationship with them well before they enter the company as an employee”. It goes without saying that, among others, internships fall within the purview of these programmes. Over and above that, it is worth noting that the understanding of the HSRC is on par with these imperatives given its recent prioritisation of the staff development programmes and the internships aimed at capacitating the previously disadvantaged people of our society, namely, blacks, women and people with disabilities (Orkin, May 2003). Buhlungu and Metcalfe

(2001) also emphasises that “an internship conceived in isolation from the politics of social exclusion and inequality that came with it, is almost certain to perpetuate rather than eliminate the racial division of labour in intellectual production”. It is ones’ conviction that over and above skills development, internships could also play a pivotal role in the efforts to overcome the history of racial division of labour in knowledge production in South Africa.

Brief history of the HSRC internships

The history of HSRC internships can be traced as far back to the early 90s. During this time, internships were centralised and coordinated by the Research Capacity Development Office within the Centre for Science Development (CSD), which later became part of the National Research Foundations (NRF). There was mutual collaboration between the RCDO and personnel office (Human Resources) as the latter was responsible for all the recruitment logistics. The last group catered by this programme was taken in 1997. The RCDO played a central role on orientation and training of interns on the social sciences research methodologies used in the HSRC, software’s, and writing skills. Interns would undergo this process for about six months, after which they were placed in different research programmes (referred to as Research Groups¹), depending on their area of specialisation. Training and mentorship manuals were prepared jointly with the Charter Training Group (a training consultancy).

In order to demonstrate their knowledge and competency acquired during the training, interns were to develop a research proposal as soon as they got placements. They also had to manage the research and write up the report following the proposal, on their own. It is with no doubt that this programme had a capacity to epitomize aspirant researchers’ prowess.

However, the fact that recruitment and placement was conducted with minimal participation from the research programmes remained obnoxious to the research programmes and led to the interns/hip not getting maximum support from senior staff. This according to some EDs largely accounted for the failure of this programme

¹ The course of time dictated terms on the naming of research areas. They were referred to as Research Groups, then New/National Priority Areas, and presently, many of these groups prefer to be called Research Programmes.

hence the emergence of inefficient mentoring and reduced benefit to and from the interns emanating from the little personal commitment to interns by senior staff.

It has now become common knowledge within the quarters of the HSRC that government funding has been dropping over the years, albeit with the exception of the past two years where it became relatively stable. This, of course, has also contributed to the cuts in some expenditure in the HSRC and directly impacted on the then internship programme as it used to get more funding from the coffers of various research programmes.

Because of the lack of common vision, commitment and support, research programmes felt they were over-spending on a project they did not believe in, and this led to the total disapproval and discontinuity of this initiative.

Fortunately in addressing the legacy of the proponents of these circumstances, the new leadership has its interest vested in the development of a new cadre of researchers and the skills development for the previously marginalized. Thus, it becomes more conspicuous that the HSRC's conceptualisation of the skills development agenda has or is changing to that of an imperative.²

Conceptualisation of the current internship programme

Unlike in the past, the current internship is solely programme (NPA) based and it is the prerogative of the NPA to decide on whether to have the internship and for what purpose. The fact that internship is NPA based logically ensues that the conceptualisation and the philosophy of the internship differs from programme to programme (NPA). In other NPAs, internships are based on the idea of "*growing own timber*" for positions that could be available in the future whereas others see internship as a way of grounding interns to the social science methodology and a transition towards pursuing higher degrees (PHD). However, the divergence on the conceptualisation, a commonality of contributing towards national skills development agenda exists in all the programmes. In all the NPAs with internships, the focus has always been on the previously marginalised groups. This will become clearer later when the distribution of interns per race, gender and qualifications is presented.

² Le Roux (2002) views Employment Equity Act as an imperative and not a political requirement. The HSRC prioritisation for 2003/2004 financial year attest to this.

The other voice

There appears to be genuine consensus on the idea of having internship in the HSRC, however the suitability of the HSRC in running the internship is also questioned. These questions arise from the premise that lately HSRC research has been predominately client based and as a result the organisation does not provide necessary collegiality environment for the development of young researcher since senior researchers do not have time for sufficient mentoring. The proponents of this view argue that the institutions of higher learning are best capable to groom future researchers and it must remain their responsibility.

Experiences from current HSRC Internships

Distinction between researchers and interns

In some of the NPAs, it is still confusing as to who is the intern and who is not an intern. Some of the NPA refers to their junior researchers as interns whereas in some of the programmes people have been offered senior research position but still regarded as interns. This calls for us to give a clear dichotomy between interns, researchers and other contract workers.

In as much as there is nothing wrong in being an intern it is also important to note that one cannot be an intern forever. There must be a movement from intern to researcher level not only in terms of the contract or status, but also the perception and duties thereof. It is my observation that this has minimized upcoming (Junior) researchers (who moves from the internship) participation and roles in thorough research work as the perception continues to be that of a novice who needs thorough mentorship and not so much competent to optimally do the work with minimal supervision.

Engagement of interns

Although there is no formalised/structured internship programme in all the NPAs, interns are highly engaged in important activities of the research process. In most cases interns are involved in literature review, data collection, capturing, and analysis, however, less involved in research conceptualisation (proposal) and research design. According to Buhlungu and Metcalfe (2001) if there is no structured

programme and the interns are not involved in research conceptualisation and design they become relievers of senior researchers in mundane activities and get moved from project to project depending on where the need for data collection and other mundane tasks exists. The shortfall of this they (Buhlungu and Metcalfe) argue is that it makes it virtually impossible for intern to develop an intellectual and research project for himself/herself and becomes gatherers of materials for senior researchers without him /her producing knowledge. This happens to be one of the concerns of current interns cohort. Due to lack of a well-coordinated structure, interns find themselves busy in menial tasks that offer very little to their development and the consequence becomes demoralisation, lack of confidence and low self-esteem. Interns need challenging activities that would enable them to develop the necessary skills needed in the competitive environment of today.

Mentoring

The success of internship depends largely on the commitment of the mentor in supervising his or her protégé and the mutual relationship that the two builds in this process. Without this internship is doomed to fail and not achieve its main objective of transferring the skills and capacity building. Unfortunately, this has been a common and major problem experienced in the internship, as it requires a lot of time and energy. This is not only a problem for the HSRC; rather it is a common problem experienced in most of the internships, more especially unstructured internships (Sullivan, 2003, Schwarz and Kalberg, 2003, DeVries, 2003, Schick 2002).

In most cases senior researchers do not have enough time to attend to interns as they are in the chase of deadlines as posed by contract research. According to Pirrie (1997) contract-driven research compromises the quality of research work and knowledge production as the researchers do the work to please the client under tightly scheduled deadlines. I would argue that, within the context of internships, this also has an adverse effect, mainly on their mentoring, development and the level at which they are engaged. It may be argued that this helps the interns to get exposure of working under pressure. On the contrary, this has put interns on the periphery as senior staff chases the bigger tenders and deadlines. Thus leaving very little time for interns. Furthermore, it limits the intern's involvement in more serious activities, as the senior researchers may not have confidence on the intern to do the work that could please the client.

Distribution of interns

As mentioned earlier, the focus of the HSRC internship is in line with the national agenda on skills development. The majority of the interns are Africans (Black) constituting 70.9 %, followed by whites 16.1%, Indians and coloureds at 6.4 % respectively.

Although males seem to be the dominant species within the HSRC research component, the distribution of males and females in the internship is not that hazardous. Females account for 48, 3 % while males accounting for 51, 6%. This attests to the fact that the recruitment of interns takes into cognisance the social imperatives of our country as well as the direction that the country is taking in terms of women empowerment and affirmation strategies.

An overwhelming majority (48%) of the interns have honours degrees and currently pursuing their master's study. Those who have completed their Masters degree constitutes 29% and most of them are in the process of working towards doctoral studies. People with just a degree accounts to only 12% of the total population of interns. Although the percentage is very meagre it is worth noting that within the internship programme there are people who have completed their doctoral studies (3%). This conspicuously illustrates the commitment of the programme towards developing aspirant researchers.

Concluding remarks

Taking it from the history of HSRC internships, a centralised internship proved to be futile leading to its obsolescence and the emergence of programme based and project oriented internships. However, the argument that internship has to be structured suffices even beyond whether it is centrally coordinated or NPA based. Literature illustrates more explicitly that a well-structured internship would help the novices to enhance their professional credentials (Sullivan, 2003, Schwarz and Kalberg, 2003, DeVries, 2003, Schick 2002). If the impact of the internship has to be felt not only on the number of interns taken per year, there must a clear plan,

developmental programme, expected outcomes and an evaluation strategy/model for the internship. According to Buhlungu and Metcalfe (2001) the lack these leads to lack of commitment by both the intern and the organisation to the internship programme and as such it defeats the purpose of the internship.

Apart from being well structured, it has to be coordinated centrally by capacity development section within the Human Resources. This will simplify the coordination of training programmes to be offered to interns and facilitation of workshops between the interns and mentors. These workshops would be aimed at orienting potential mentors and protégés of the expectations, objectives and strategies for the programme because Le Roux (2002) alludes that “the most successful mentorship/s is/are a result of the fact that great care was given to the orientation for the potential mentors and protégé...”

One of the suggestions coming from the participants is that the HSRC should start to look at the possibilities of having a budget allocation to each NPA for a particular number of interns per year. However, as I have argued before, it is important that those NPAs that affords to have more than what is centrally budgeted for are not deprived of their potential and chance.

Lastly, in order to restore the commitment of senior researchers in overlooking, giving support and mentoring in the internship, some form of incentive has to be given. This could be initiated by including mentorship as part of key performance areas for senior staff. Hopefully this may also pave a way for programmes to include the internship programme on their annual reports to reflect on staff development initiatives taken by the HSRC.

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