



# **Normalised Delegation: The Systemic Misuse of Interns and Trainees in the South African Public Sector**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The South African public sector's growing reliance on interns, graduate volunteers, and in-service trainees is indicative of a structural issue with human resource management. This article examines how systemic abuse has arisen as a result of the normalization of delegation to these temporary workers, where interns carry out tasks intended for permanent employees, often without the appropriate acknowledgment or compensation. Through a qualitative desk-based analysis of government communications, policy documents, media reports, and secondary academic sources, the study determines how institutional cultures, inadequate oversight, and a lack of human resources contribute to this trend. The results imply that interns are not only overutilized but also unofficially incorporated into essential service delivery positions, making it difficult to distinguish between exploitation and training. The reality frequently reflects a failure of state capacity, with permanent staff shifting their responsibilities onto temporary, inexperienced personnel, despite the fact that internship programs are intended to promote skill development. In order to safeguard these workers from exploitation and maintain the effectiveness of the public sector, the article makes the case for redefining intern roles and implementing regulatory oversight procedures. The results add to discussions about workforce planning, public sector reform in developing nations, and labour precarity.

**Keywords** Internships; Public Sector; Labour Exploitation; Delegation; South Africa

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## **1. Introduction and Background**

In the public sector of South Africa, internships and graduate training programs are now standard components of human capital development. These programs, which were initially created to address youth unemployment and expose participants to work readiness, are increasingly being appropriated to close systemic gaps in service delivery. Although the Department of Public Service and Administration (2023) promotes opportunities for experiential learning, many interns are treated casually like full-time staff members and overextended beyond their developmental roles. Although it has received little scholarly attention, the abuse of interns has become commonplace in public institutions and is ingrained in day-to-day operations of the public sector. The increasing reliance on interns and trainees is not a band-aid solution; rather, it is a reflection of more serious systemic problems, such as a lack of skills, departments that have been hollowed out, permanent employees' absenteeism, and informal managerial cultures that encourage delegation without accountability. Interns are frequently tasked with managing official correspondence, carrying out essential administrative tasks, or even representing departments in stakeholder engagements, according to anecdotal evidence and reports (Molefe & Dlamini, 2022). Policy frameworks that characterize internships as purely developmental are in conflict. The structural and cultural factors that have normalized this type of covert labour are examined in this article. The goal is to comprehend the factors that are driving this trend, the effects it has on interns and institutions, and the policy gaps that allow it to occur. The main research question is: How and why has the South African public sector institutionalized assigning interns and trainees core responsibilities?

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## **2. Literature Review**

It is commonly acknowledged that internships are effective ways to help young people become employable and prepared for the workforce, particularly in developing nations where graduate unemployment is high (Ngcamu, 2021; Mahlangu & Makeleni, 2022). In South Africa, national human resource development frameworks and sector-specific programs run by organizations like the Public Service Sector Education and Training Authority (PSETA) have long supported internships in the public sector. Reducing youth unemployment and enhancing public administration capacity through skill transfer are the two goals of these interventions (Maphisa & Lekhuleni, 2023). However, the internship model is starting to face challenges from both local and international scholarship, particularly when it comes to its use in state institutions. Although internships are meant to provide experiential learning, Spooner and McDonald (2022) contend that they are increasingly designed to benefit host institutions more than the interns. According to recent studies conducted in South Africa, interns in the public sector are frequently tasked with crucial operational duties, frequently in situations where permanent staff members are absent or understaffed (Khosa, 2023; Lekabe & Mokoena, 2024).

The spirit of skills development policies has been undermined by many public institutions' normalization of assigning interns and trainees basic administrative tasks rather than offering structured mentorship and development (Dikgale & Sebopetsa, 2023). Inadequate supervisory frameworks and ambiguous role definitions that expose interns to exploitation exacerbate the problem. Sibanda and Molepo (2022) claim that interns usually function in a state known as "functional limbo," in which they are not protected as employees nor considered students. Furthermore, there is no centralized enforcement system in place in the South African public sector to guarantee that internship positions stay within their developmental mandate. Although departments may adhere to internship policy requirements in a procedural manner, interns' daily experiences frequently differ greatly from what is described in official documentation (Mohlala & Nyawo, 2023). The entrenchment of exploitative practices is facilitated by this compliance-performance gap, in which departments meet reporting requirements but fall short in actual implementation.

Researchers have also observed that the growing use of interns in the public sector is related to more general trends of informalization in formal bureaucracies. Because of fiscal austerity, public service vacancies are frequently frozen, but service delivery standards are unaffected. Thus, interns and trainees are used as a short-term solution to structural HR bottlenecks (Mabunda, 2022). These interns are frequently tasked with strategic tasks like report writing, meeting coordination, and correspondence management in addition to clerical support duties. This circumstance exemplifies what Tshabalala and Ndlovu (2020) called "policy drift," in which operational desperation and bureaucratic necessity gradually distort the original goal of developmental programs. These practices are further reinforced by the lack of effective redress channels for interns, who are not represented by a union or have formal grievance procedures, especially in departments with limited resources and those located in rural areas.

In conclusion, a growing amount of research indicates that internships are being systemically abused in public institutions, even though the literature currently in publication recognizes the value of internships in tackling unemployment and skills shortages. However, the phenomenon is still poorly understood, particularly in South Africa, where informal delegation practices seem to have become ingrained in the culture of the public sector. By presenting internship misuse as a structural response to organizational fragility, a lack of accountability, and long-standing informal managerial practices, rather than just an administrative oversight, this article helps close this gap.

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### 3. Theoretical Framework

New institutionalism and labour process theory serve as the guiding frameworks for this investigation. The labour process theory (Braverman, 1974; Thompson, 2020) studies the use of managerial power, delegation, and control in the workplace. This theory aids in explaining how hierarchical structures in the context of public sector internships permit the assignment of tasks to the most vulnerable employees, interns, without appropriate accountability or acknowledgment. The coexistence of formal regulations and informal norms in organizational life is clarified by new institutionalism (March & Olsen, 2011). Although internships are officially defined by government policies as supportive and educational, institutional norms frequently override these regulations through unofficial means. Together, these frameworks show how, in spite of official policy, informal delegation practices have permeated organizational cultures.

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### 4. Methodology

- A qualitative, desk-based research design based on document analysis was used in this study. Among the primary data sources were:
- Frameworks for government internship policies (such as DPSA guidelines)
- Reports from oversight organizations, such as those published by the Public Service Commission,
- Investigative journalism and news outlets about internships;
- scholarly works published in peer-reviewed journals (2019–2024)

Without using actual human subjects, this method avoided the need for ethical approval by enabling the triangulation of insights across institutional, policy, and experiential domains. The analysis concentrated on recurrent themes pertaining to power imbalances, delegation, and role ambiguity.

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### 5. Results

Three interconnected conclusions were drawn from the examination of government internship documentation, pertinent policy guidelines, current scholarly works, and secondary data sources: role substitution, institutionalized informality, and HR voids combined with managerial disengagement. These themes indicate a pattern of systematic internship misuse that has permeated the public sector's daily operations in South Africa.

#### 5.1 Role Substitution

Interns were routinely tasked with core responsibilities typically assigned to permanent employees, particularly at junior and operational levels. These duties included putting together stakeholder reports, responding to internal and external communications, scheduling official departmental activities, and creating technical briefs. During staff leave, interns were sometimes even left in charge of entire portfolios without the formal recognition or institutional support they needed.

This substitution was especially common in departments with limited resources, where interns were seen as informal staff extensions rather than as students. Maphisa and Lekhuleni (2023) reported that interns in provincial departments were viewed as the "backbone of operations," with little differentiation between them and administrative clerks who were employed on a permanent basis. In addition to exposing interns to work expectations that surpass their formal capacity and legal protection, this substitution has the dual effect of undervaluing the structured learning principle.

### ***5.2 Institutionalised Informality***

The terms "exposure" and "capacity building" are frequently used to justify assigning interns' significant tasks. The dynamics at work, however, show a different picture. In practice, this rarely translated into formal capacity development or structured mentorship, despite supervisors' justification of the overuse of interns as part of their training (Khosa, 2023; Lekabe & Mokoena, 2024). The lack of appropriate job descriptions, performance evaluations, or development plans among interns was a sign of institutional indifference rather than deliberate training. In many government offices, where interns are expected to work independently despite their inexperience, this informality has become the de facto norm. Resistance is frequently silenced by the lack of complaint procedures and interns' anxiety about endangering their chances of finding work in the future (Dikgale & Sebopetsa, 2023). Additionally, a lot of departments don't have HR monitoring tools or internal audits that could identify or stop these unofficial delegations.

### ***5.3 HR Voids and Managerial Disengagement***

A larger institutional failure characterized by persistent staff shortages, absenteeism, and managerial disengagement lies at the heart of these trends. Due to financial limitations, many departments have frozen positions or delayed hiring, but the demands for service delivery are always there. Consequently, interns serve as a short-term buffer against operational pressure (Mabunda, 2022).

Line managers are depending more and more on interns to "keep the system running" rather than creating alternate staffing plans or enhancing internal work scheduling. Deeper problems in performance management and human resource supervision are reflected in this delegation, which is frequently informal and opaque. According to studies by Sibanda and Molepo (2022), some departments, particularly in rural municipalities with less robust monitoring systems, employ interns as covert labour to reduce the risk of subpar performance during staff absenteeism. The sustainability of the institution and moral hiring practices are also called into question by this finding. In addition to being against policy, using interns as a replacement workforce instead of a developmental resource jeopardizes the long-term viability of public sector operations.

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## **6. Discussion**

The study's conclusions point to a pervasive and often disregarded type of labour precarity in South Africa's public sector that stems from the institutional abuse of trainees and interns. In practice, internships frequently act as unofficial labour reserves used to address severe structural deficiencies, despite their intended purpose of providing opportunities for professional development and workplace learning. In addition to going against the intended policy goals, this transition from student to unofficial employee causes a chain reaction of organizational dysfunctions.

### ***6.1 The Contradiction Between Policy and Practice***

A basic discrepancy between official HR policy and actual organizational practice is at the core of this misuse. The Department of Public Service and Administration's official internship guidelines from 2023 place a strong emphasis on structured supervision, developmental exposure, and mentoring. However, as this study and Mohlala and Nyawo (2023) have shown, public institutions often succeed in meeting procedural compliance requirements while falling short of the substantive spirit of the policy. A disjuncture between "rules-in-form" and "rules-in-use", written policies versus the norms that guide daily operations, is reflected in this tension, according to March and Olsen (2011). Not through strategic planning, but rather as a last-minute reaction to staff shortages, low morale, and lax internal controls, interns are absorbed into roles that surpass both their mandate and capacity. These behaviours are adaptive in a dysfunctional system; they are not aberrations.

### ***6.2 Normalised Informality as an Organisational Culture***

The practice of assigning crucial tasks to interns has become institutionalized informality and is no longer an isolated instance of misuse. Line managers and supervisors frequently justify this behaviour as providing "exposure" or "experience," avoiding the need to offer supervision, feedback, or guidance (Khosa, 2023; Lekabe & Mokoena, 2024). The lack of efficient accountability systems serves to further solidify these unofficial agreements. There is a blind spot in performance and human resource management because departments hardly ever audit the actual work completed by interns or get feedback from them. This is consistent with global patterns in emerging bureaucracies, especially in the Global South, where informal reinterpretations of formal roles are made possible by inadequate internal oversight mechanisms (Spooner & McDonald, 2022). Because interns are structurally disempowered, they lack employment contracts, union protections, and grievance channels, and are therefore the most pliable group within the public workforce, this informal delegation culture flourishes in South Africa.

### ***6.3 Consequences for Organisational Integrity and Equity***

The normalization of delegation has detrimental effects on the larger institutional ecosystem in addition to its immediate effects on interns. First, it breeds animosity between generations and between positions. According to many interns, junior permanent employees treat them as de facto subordinates, and

some of them give them administrative or personal tasks that have nothing to do with their professional growth (Dikgale & Sebopetsa, 2023). Without institutional protections, this power imbalance breeds animosity and supports a workplace culture that values unofficial hierarchies over merit-based ones.

Secondly, it jeopardizes the sustainability of the institution. There is a greater chance that service delivery continuity will be reliant on temporary and inexperienced labour as interns become unofficial shock absorbers in departments that are experiencing chronic understaffing. This erodes public trust in the government and, more importantly, establishes a system in which professional training and mentoring are replaced by ad hoc delegation and exploitation.

Finally, this culture affects justice and equity in the public sector. Particularly at risk are interns from rural or historically underprivileged institutions, who frequently lack the networks or social capital to demand better treatment. Their inaction, motivated by a fear of losing their job prospects in the future, feeds an exploitative cycle that is rarely stopped.

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## 7. Conclusion

This study has shown that the systematic mistreatment of interns and trainees in the South African public sector is a systematic institutional response to long-standing structural deficiencies rather than the result of occasional managerial carelessness. Formally positioned as temporary learners and recipients of skills, interns are frequently incorporated into the state's operational machinery in ways that go against both the goals of policy and moral labour standards. These instances are by no means anomalies; rather, they reflect a more widespread institutional norm influenced by unofficial organizational cultures, understaffed departments, and inadequate accountability systems. According to the findings, it is best to view the normalization of delegation to interns as a sign of organizational fragility rather than just an HR gap. Interns become both invisible workers and stand-ins for broken systems as a result of the hollowing out of crucial administrative tasks, ongoing staffing shortages, and the informal reallocation of responsibilities. Their labour is both necessary and unappreciated, and it contributes to an institutional dependency that jeopardizes service delivery and long-term sustainability.

By moving the emphasis from internship compliance to the routine operational dynamics that shape their misuse, this article adds to the body of knowledge on labour precarity, state dysfunction, and public administration ethics. Additionally, it expands on recent research that highlights the informalization of work within official state systems, especially in low and middle-income settings.

Future research should include qualitative interviews with interns, HR professionals, and departmental supervisors to further document the everyday realities and contradictions embedded in internship deployment, even though this study relied on secondary data sources and publicly available documentation. These viewpoints are essential for comprehending how internships are experienced, distorted, and accepted in the workplace in addition to how they are implemented.

Furthermore, policy reform is obviously required, including the implementation of transparent performance metrics, protective grievance channels, enforceable internship guidelines, and recurring audits of intern placement procedures. Without these actions, the current trend is probably going to continue, which will worsen institutional inertia in the public sector as well as youth labour exploitation.

In conclusion, intern exploitation should not be viewed as a side issue; rather, it is a reflection of deeper organizational shortcuts and administrative failures that, if ignored, will further damage the legitimacy and efficacy of South African public institutions.

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