

# Rethinking Intern Labour in the context of a precarious economic environment: A Case of Students of Higher Learning Institutions in Zimbabwe

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## Abstract

The study has been necessitated by a dearth in empirical research on experiences of interns in economically challenged economies, particularly in the Global South. The study aimed at investigating challenges of interns that are precipitated by a poorly performing economy. Qualitative interpretivist approach was adopted. In-depth interviews were conducted with 25 participants, 20 of which were students who had returned from an internship programme and 5 were key informants drawn from organisations' human resource departments. Participants were purposively sampled. Although benefits can be derived from internship programmes, an economically unstable environment can pose challenges to such programmes. Challenges include difficulties in securing internship placements, abusive and exploitative relationships, non-payment, discrepancy between one's field and what they do in organisations as interns and closures of organisations before students are assessed. Some organisations are deliberately taking advantage of the deteriorating economic situation to continuously hire interns who are paid nothing at best and little at worst in a bid to cut down on costs. The study recommends the establishment of mandatory codes of conduct on internship programmes by the organisations and the Ministry of Higher Education. Academic institutions should also enter into MoUs with organisations on issues pertaining to internship programmes.

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**Key phrases**

*Academic institution; intern labour; mentor; organisation and precarious economy*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Research on internship learning, as noted by May and Veitch (1998:630), has largely focused on the significance of such a programme in the preparation of students. Internship in institutions of higher education emanated from the realisation that a gap existed between the quality of graduates produced and the expectations of the market in terms of skills, abilities and knowledge (Bukaliya 2012:118). There is a convergence of literature on the benefits to different stakeholders of internship programmes (Furco 1996a:7; Lam & Ching 2007:92; Makuvaro, Ngara & Magwa 2015:129; Mgaya & Mbekomize 2014:129; Mounce, Mauldin & Braun 2004:399; Sanahuja Vélez & Ribes Giner 2015:103).

It however remains to be seen whether internship programmes can maintain its importance and benefits in the face of a precarious economic environment. This article argues that the existing economic environment obtaining in Zimbabwe has reconfigured internship programmes, both on the part of the students as well as on the part of the organisations. There seems to be a dearth of empirical research on internship programmes for students in higher education in economically unstable environments, particularly from the Global South. Most of the researches on internship programmes have been carried out in economically stable environments and in the Global North (Furco 1996b:7; Hurst, Good & Gardner 2012:504; Mihail 2006:28; Perlin 2012:3; Schwartz 2013:41). This article therefore contributes to the body of knowledge by focusing on internship programmes in an economically unstable environment and by tapping from the students' experiences themselves.

Acute social, political and economic crisis have characterised Zimbabwe since the year 2001 (Hanke 2008:4; Stoeffler, Alwang, Mills & Taruvinga 2016:1). As part of its literature, the paper will start by briefly outlining the economic trajectories that the Zimbabwean economy has gone through. This is important because organisations providing internship programmes to students operate within an economic environment which affects its operations.

Literature will continue by looking into the intended purpose of internship programmes. Focus will be on global, regional and local trends. Knowledge of such programmes are instrumental in analysing developments occurring in Zimbabwe in as far as internship programmes are concerned, bearing in mind the intended benefits of such programmes.

## **2. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS**

### **2.1 Zimbabwean Economic Trajectories and Unemployment**

The Zimbabwean economy has gone through tremendous negative changes since the attainment of independence in 1980 and as noted by Levinsohn (2008:3) such an environment has a bearing on (un)employment rates which eventually obtains in a country.

Before 1980, Zimbabwe used the Rhodesia dollar, which upon the attainment of independence paved way for the Zimbabwe dollar. The Zimbabwean currency however got eroded through hyperinflation. The country, for the first time, breached the hyperinflation benchmark in March 2007 when it shot beyond the 50% threshold (Makochekeanwa 2016:3). Zimstat (2013:14) has it that the last hyperinflation figure in July 2008 stood at 231million percent. Despite this figure being high, the inflation rate was higher than the official figure (Makochekeanwa 2016:3). On the same note, Hanke (2008:6) argues that in November 2008, Zimbabwe's hyperinflation rate was pegged at 89.7 sextillion percent. In an effort to arrest the deteriorating currency, Makochekeanwa (2016:3), the Zimbabwe dollar was redenominated three times in less than three years in a process coded the cutting' or 'slashing of zeros'. A total of 25 zeros were slashed within this period. The continuous depreciation of the Zimbabwean currency ultimately led to the adoption of the multicurrency system, with the United States of America Dollar being the dominant currency used (Chitokwinda, Mago & Hofisi 2014:416; Makochekeanwa 2016:4). The multicurrency adoption witnessed a turnaround of the economy as reflected by price stability, single digit inflation rate as well as GDP growth (Chitokwinda *et al.* 2014:416). Economic performance is however maintained as indicated by Chitokwinda *et al.* (2014:416) still marred by challenges which include obsolete infrastructure, external debt, liquidity shortages, power outages, low aggregate demand, skills gap and high unemployment.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of May 2016, The Reserve bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ) announced the impending Zimbabwe Bond Notes. Although most Zimbabweans were not comfortable with the new currency, authorities went on to introduce it. The argument from RBZ as noted by Nyamunda (2016:12), was to address the prevailing liquidity challenges in the country. The majority of fears were related to the 2008 economic experiences which led to unprecedented suffering of Zimbabweans (Makochekanwa 2016:4). Authorities however assured the public that the Bond Notes would be equivalent to United States of America Dollar (Munhupedzi & Chidakwa 2017:15). Despite assurance from the Central Bank, the introduction of Bond Notes has not done much to resolve the economic challenges facing the country. The performance of an economy, as alluded to earlier on has a bearing on (un)employment rate in a country, thus the essence of the remaining part of this section.

The unemployment rate in 2014 as highlighted by Rusvingo (2015:2) stood at 85%. This economic position is a reminiscent of decades of long economic challenges that resulted in industrial incapacitation and closures. This led to massive job losses in an environment where supply of labour had already exceeded its demand (Rusvingo 2015:4).

The Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries (2014:18) indicates that Zimbabwe's manufacturing sector is struggling with most firms operating below full capacity. It has been established that capacity utilisation was 18.9% in 2009, 57% in 2011, 44.9% in 2012 and 39.6% in 2013. Through the interdependence between sectors, the effects of low capacity utilisation spread to other sectors of the economy (Rusvingo 2015:2). Debate on unemployment and employment has been in existence for many years both in developed and developing economies. Unemployment is associated with poverty, crime, violence, moral loss as well as degradation. Under such an environment, the cost of doing business is increased as aggregate demand decreases (Levinsohn 2008:3). To cut down on operating costs, organisations may focus on labour costs. Tripathi (2014:932) notes that downsizing is one of the most popular strategies employed by organisations to survive and compete in current business scenarios. Within the Zimbabwean context, downsizing is precipitated by economic related arguments (Rusvingo 2015:2).

## 2.2 Internship programmes in institutions of higher education

An internship programme, also known as work related learning by Makuvaro *et al.* (2015:12) is a type of student employment experience that is usually organised by their institution, related to their field of study and geared to make connections between classroom learning and on-the-job experiences. In this study, the terms internship, work-related-learning and student attachment will be used interchangeably as they are applied within the Zimbabwean context.

Internship has been viewed by different researchers as offering a diversity of benefits to the student intern (Furco 1996a:7; Sanahuja Vélez & Ribes Giner 2015:121). The programme engages the intern in service activities primarily for providing them with hands-on experience that enhances their learning or understanding of issues relevant to an area of study. Students are assisted to bridge the gap between the academic learning process and the practical reality (Furco 1996b:8; Lam & Ching 2007:92). Mounce *et al.* (2004:399) highlight the importance of relevant practical experience for students. However, Beard and Morton (1999:43) argue that there is a need for follow-up with the intern to successfully transfer knowledge gained in the field of practice into the actual workplace engagement.

Industrial pressure and the growing demand for competent graduates with the right knowledge, skills and attitudes, has compelled universities and other higher learning institutions to incorporate an industrial internship programme to their curricular (Karunaratne & Perera 2015:21).

Work related learning has become a critical component in university learning and students, employers and universities accrue benefits from it. Students acquire knowledge, skills and understanding of the world of work by experiencing work related learning. Students develop expertise through the acquisition of technical skills, personal and social competences and also through socialisation in the workplace (Beard 1998:508; Beard & Morton 1999:43; Bukaliya 2012:120; Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick & Cragnolini 2004:149).

Employers also accrue benefits from engaging students on attachment who add value to the organisation at low or no cost at all. Internship programmes if not properly conducted can be avenues for cheap labour, ultimately leading to exploitative working conditions and human slavery for the students. Such efforts to cut labour costs result in the rise of hegemonic

cultural and political mechanisms that reinforce class divisions within the workplace (Tewksbury 2015:526). Unlike in Zimbabwe, Tewksbury (2015:526) has it that in most developed countries such as the United States of America, Canada and Great Britain there are laws in place to protect unpaid interns from exploitation.

Although advised of their rights, students are usually reluctant to file a complaint with the university they are coming from about illegal or abusive internships, either out of fear that they would not get a positive letter of recommendation, the loss of a good grade, as well as the possibility of a financial burden associated with failing a module. Students are also afraid of a stigma of being labelled as a troublemaker (Perlin 2012:3).

There is a raging debate among scholars on the efficacy of work related learning (Karunaratne & Perera 2015:21; Makuvaro *et al.* 2015:12; Bukaliya 2012:118). There is convergence of literature on the benefits of internship to the student, employer and the universities (Binder, Baguley, Crook & Miller 2015:73; Pernsteiner 2015:84). However, in some organisations, students on work related learning are not given adequate on-the-job training, they end up doing work not related to the programmes being studied and are regarded as cheap labour (Matamande, Nyikahadzoi & Taderera 2013).

### **2.3 Flexible Resourcing in Organisations**

Organisations across the globe must deal with a turbulent environment, which in turn forces them to restructure and respond accordingly (Mupani 2015:90). Organisations can respond to economic turmoil through restructuring its workforce. This section serves to highlight how organisations can restructure their workforce in relation to the availability of intern students, particularly in an unstable economy.

In his classic writings, Handy (1989:11) argued that people are the most important resource critical for the achievement of superior performance. Handy (1989:22) advocated for short term jobs or contracts, arguing that non-essential should be contracted out to people who are specialised and can produce high. The model demonstrates three bases on which people are often employed. The first level relates to qualified professional technicians and managers. At this level the individuals possess in-depth knowledge, aims, and methods of work. They facilitate for the continuity of the organisation. They are awarded with high salaries, benefits, and other privileges. However, in return they are expected to commit their

time and energy into their jobs and be easily accessible. This is similar to Atkinson (1984:4) flexible model which establishes the core work force, made up of highly skilled workers, who participate in decision making, receive high salaries and benefits and are directly employed by the organisation (Dyer 1998:106).

The second level in the model is comprised of contracted or outsourced specialists who may be used for essential functions within the organisation such as advertising, catering, and cleaning services. This group is rewarded more on a basis of results than time, and on fees than salaries. The third leaf consists of a flexible labour force, discharging part-time, temporary and seasonal roles (Handy 1989:17). They are paid by the hour or day or week for the time they work. Students on work related learning may fall under this leaf as they are 'employed' by organisations on a short-term basis, for the duration of the attachment. They are a source of cheap labour to the organisation and therefore are easily dispensable. Due to this, they end up being 'exploited' in one form or the other, through doing menial jobs that are not relevant to what they are studying at college.

Given the pressures of both efficiency and flexibility, firms are exploring the use of different employment modes to allocate work (Lepak & Snell 1999:31). The model proposes that within organisations, considerable variance exists regarding both the uniqueness and value of skills. The uniqueness of human capital, refers to the degree to which it is rare, specialised and, in the extreme, firm-specific (Lepak & Snell 1999:34). The model is divided into four quadrants namely knowledge-based employment, job-based employment, contractual work arrangements and alliances/partnerships.

In the knowledge-based employment, Lepak and Snell (1999:34) argue that human capital is most likely to be viewed as core to the firm. Because of their value, these employees can contribute to a firm's strategic objectives. These workers are those most likely to represent a firm's knowledge workers - those people who use their heads more than their hands to produce value (Horibe 1999:98). In these instances, firms are likely to rely on a knowledge-based employment mode that focuses on internal development and long-term employee commitment for their core employees. Quadrant two is job-based employment; these workers' skills are not particularly unique to the firm and thus, cannot serve as a differentiating source of competitiveness. Workers can make significant contributions to a

firm while possessing skills that are widely transferable (Lepak & Snell 1999:37). The term job-based employment is used to reflect the fact that employees are hired to perform predetermined tasks. Quadrant three is the contractual work arrangements and compliance-based HR configuration, and contains human capital that is neither of particularly high strategic value to a firm nor unique. Workers in this category are prime candidates for outsourcing (Lepak & Snell 1999:37). In a scenario where a job holder is as good as the other, firms would be more likely to seek short-term contractual arrangements for the performance of tasks with limited scope, purpose, or duration. At the extreme, if value-added is low and skills are generic, employment decisions may reduce to calculations of costs (Abraham & Taylor 1996:418). In such cases, firms may reduce their employment costs while increasing their flexibility by contracting for ancillary human capital (Lepak & Snell 1999:40). Students on work related learning may fall under quadrant three as they are contracted for a short duration. They can be easily hired and fired, and new employees can be quickly taken on board. The organisation can afford to stay with a few critical staff and outsource the rest, different cohorts are treated differently.

Atkinson (1984:4) relates to workplace management and organisation technique that optimises human resources through flexibility based on segmenting the employees into peripheral and core groups. The core workforce is said to be made up of highly skilled workers who can participate in decision making and are directly employed by an organisation. Such employees are difficult to replace because they have a specific set of skills or experience, and are provided with job security and high salaries that reflect skill level and their importance to the organisation. The numerical flexibility falls under the peripheral group which consists of employees who could easily be replaced or are only needed in the organisation for either peak periods or on specific tasks and meets fluctuations in the demand of company products. They are characterised by low wages, low job security and having little or no autonomy in their work. Numerical flexibility is often related with limited employment security rights (Sarantinos & Co 2007:10).

Temporal flexibility refers to shifting working hours to meet production demands. This can include working overtime and spreading the working hours unevenly over a period depending on fluctuations in production. Part-time employment also might be used by the organisation to face even tougher peaks in demand.



### **3. METHODS**

A qualitative research methodology approach, particularly the interpretivist paradigm was adopted in this study. The aim was to generate rich insights that could inform knowledge of the current internship programmes in Zimbabwe. In-depth interviews were used to collect data from two different categories of participants.

The first category encompassed students at a tertiary institution who had just returned from work related learning and the second category was composed of human resources personnel who acted as key informants. The sample of students was drawn from the Departments of Human Resource Management, Psychology, Sociology, Rural and Urban Development and Social Ecology. Two students from each Department, a female and a male were purposively sampled for this study. The study also purposively sampled five key informants. Human resource managers and senior human resources officers whose organisation had reputations of taking students for internship programmes took part as key informants. All in all, the study composed of 25 participants, 20 students and 5 key informants. Each interview took an average time of 30 minutes. Stephens (2007:77) notes that interviews generally take an hour or more, but argued that in some cases, an interview may take less than an hour. Data was arranged into different emerging themes using Clarke and Braun (2013:10)'s guide for thematic analysis.

### **4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This section focuses on both the presentation and discussion of findings. Themes that developed from the participants are expanded and where necessary are compared to the existing literature. It has emerged from the study that students on work related learning training face several challenges as they go through their work-related learning year. These challenges can be traced back to a poorly performing economy directly or indirectly.

#### **4.1 Abusive relationships**

Findings have established that female students are exposed to some cunning members of organisations who take advantage of their positions to exploit them. Female students have expressed concern over some form of sexual harassment perpetrated against them by some employees. It has emerged that female students are abused as they fear victimisation which

might result in them being unfairly assessed by a mentor. In relation to this finding, Perlin (2012:3) notes that some internship programmes can be abusive in nature and here, abusive was non-gender specific. This study has revealed gender specific abusive internship programmes targeting female students. It is possible that some organisations could be taking advantage of the poor economic performance obtaining in Zimbabwe, making securing work-related placements difficult to lure unsuspecting female students into abusive organisations or individual managers.

In line with this argument, male participants argued that it is easier for females to secure a work-related learning placement than male students. However, to justify such a trend, key informants highlighted that organisations are making efforts to empower the previously disempowered girl child through giving females enhanced opportunities ahead of their male counterparts.

*It is not a secret that empowering females is a current topical issue. As organisations, I guess it is a noble idea to go along with this wave in trying to promote the status of our girl child. Key informant 2.*

This gesture by organisations is however construed by male students as building a platform which organisational members would use to sexually exploit female students. It is imperative to highlight the idea of empowering female students is noble but can be used by some unscrupulous organisational members to pursue their selfish motives, thus taking advantage of the female students who would have come primarily to learn, not to find love.

#### **4.2 Work-related learning vacancies and the declining economy**

Securing places for work related learning has been argued to be difficult for students. This can be attributed to the poor performance of the economy currently obtaining in Zimbabwe. This finding can be explained by the argument of Rusvingo (2015:2) who notes that Zimbabwean industries are operating far below capacity, forcing them to retrench continuously. Zimwara and Mbohwa (2015) further reveal that in Harare, 711 company closures were reported between July 2011 and July 2013. The closure of companies and under-utilisation could be responsible for the challenges faced by students in securing work-related placements. Related to this aspect has been the notion whereby participants argued that they end up accepting placements which are in one way or the other remote from their

studies of specialisation due to limited options presented to them by a declining economy. In line with this, participant 2 shared similar sentiments with participant 5, 9, 11 and 16 when he argued;

*Some students, I am one example, failed to secure attachment in my field. I then got a chance to be placed in this other organisation, but it is detached from my field. If I had an option, I would not have settled for it. I was at pains explaining to my lecturers the link between what I was doing in the organisation and my area of specialisation, thank God, my lecturer understood my position and graded me. Participant 2.*

### 4.3 Discrepancy between nature of work and one's line of study

Another anomaly is a situation where students are being 'exploited', through doing menial jobs that are not relevant to what they are studying in college. Students end up being assigned to tasks that are not relevant to what they are supposed to undertake, this includes running errands for staff members, or supervisors. Participants revealed that often, they are exposed to work that has nothing to do with their respective fields.

Table 1 below depicts some of the tasks that students on work related-learning are asked to perform.

**Table 1: Tasks that students are asked to perform**

Nature of Task	Participants
Preparing and serving tea	P1, P2, P5, P8, P9, P11, P12, P16, P17, P18, P20
Collecting clothes from dry cleaning	P2, P3, P13, P13
Washing dishes	P1, P2, P4, P5, P8, P9, P11, P12, P16, P17, P18, P20
Messenger related duties	P2, P4, P6, P9, P10, P12, P14, P18
Manual and tedious work	P3, P5, P6, P11, P13, P17, P18
Typing documents	P2, P3, P7, P8, P11, P13, P15, P16, P17, P18, P19, P20
Collecting managers' children from school	P4, P6, P7
Going to buy bread	P1, P2, P5, P8, P9, P11, P12, P13, P15, P16, P17, P18, P20

Source: Survey results

Previous studies have mainly highlighted the benefits derived by students from internship programmes (Beard & Morton 1999:43; Bukaliya 2012:118; Crebert *et al.* 2004:149). Other scholars, such as Tewksbury (2015:526) have also dwelt on how organisations turn to benefit from internship programmes. This study has however revealed that students on internship programmes may be on the receiving end of some abusive and exploitative relationships. In this case, organisations could be taking advantage of shortage of work-related placements due to poor economic performance as highlighted by Rusvingo (2015:2) and the reluctance of students, as noted by Perlin (2012:3) to complain officially for fear of possible victimisation.

Related to the above, the study has established that most organisations do not have specific policies or codes of conduct that governs the operations of students on work related internships. Codes of conduct and policies in many organisations apply to full-time employees. Lack of such policies may mean students on work related learning internships are open to abuse as there are no rules and regulations to govern their behaviours and conduct at the same time protecting them.

However, key informants argued that it is in the interest of the students to be exposed to virtually all facets and activities of the organisation. It is true that students must have a holistic understanding of how organisations function and operate. Students must be exposed to different departments such as finance, marketing, public relations, production and human resources amongst other departments depending on the nature of the organisation. It is however important to highlight that some of the tasks reported by students have nothing to do with the organisation and are rather personal, these include collecting clothes from the dry cleaning as well as collecting managers' children from school. In response, as noted by key informant 4, being given such social related tasks reveals the level of faith a manager would be having towards a student as these tasks are not given to anyone, but a selected few. Most students, however, described such tasks as unwelcome as they are perceived to be abusive in nature. Students highlighted that because of their inferior positions in the organisations, it is difficult for them to protest and they end up carrying out these tasks against their will. The high costs associated with changing an organisation, especially in a depressed economy, also restricts students from making their voices heard.

#### 4.4 Poor reporting structures for students on attachment

Being everyone's subordinate was another theme that emerged from this study. Students indicated that they received instructions from almost everyone who is in the organisation and some of these instructions were reportedly conflicting.

*We are at the mercy of everyone, any Jack and Jill can send you. Even the office orderlies can also make you jump. We are send from all angles and at times the duties can be incompatible.* Participant 6.

Key informant, one, three and five however disconfirmed this, arguing that each student is allocated a single mentor who guides the operations of that particular student. The usual absence of a formal code of conduct could be responsible for the development argued by students. In its absence, interns are prone to instructions from anyone who views themselves as senior to the student.

#### 4.5 Inadequate or non-payment of students on attachment

Students argued that in many instances, they were at worst not paid at all and at best paid amounts which were far below expectations, yet they were offering services to their respective organisations. Even though they are students, they are expected to be at their respective work stations on time as well as putting on formal attire, yet much of their attire at university is casual wear. Below are sentiments shared by participant 6. Similar sentiments were also echoed by participants 9, 10, 17 and 20

*All they want is to see us coming to work on time and properly dressed yet they do not even give us even a single cent to fund all that. Where do they expect us to get the money from? It is a big challenge for most of us who come from economically unstable backgrounds.* Participant 6.

They need to fund their transport fare, lunch meals and clothing amongst other expenses. In relation to this, four key informants admitted that organisations are taking advantage of students on work related learning for free or cheaper form of labour. This confirms the arguments by Tewksbury (2015:526) and Edziwa and Chivheya (2013:74) who note that organisations are benefiting from cheap labour. It has emerged that students on work related learning are the cheapest form of labour, cheaper than those on contract which were

previously considered to be the cheapest. The key informants argued that many organisations were finding it increasingly difficult to pay their employees due to the prevailing poor economic environment obtaining in Zimbabwe and were opting to scale down their employee numbers, replacing them with students on work related learning who can be replaced every academic year.

#### **4.6 Company closures before assessment of students**

It has also been noted that the economic quagmire obtaining in the country has forced some companies to close down, forcing some students who would have been attached to these organisations to leave before the end of their respective terms as per the regulation of tertiary institutions.

*Some firms can just shut down due to economic challenges while some may scale down operations as they adjust to the prevailing economic meltdown. Students on attachment are just told not to report for duty the following day yet they are supposed to be evaluated. This is a very complicated issue because at times you would have gone for 6 months, and this could be wasted time as you will have to look for another placement and start all over again. Participant 18.*

In line with such a development is the notion presented by Sarantinos and Co (2007:10) who has it that numerical flexibility is often associated with limited employment rights and this will also affect students who can easily be made redundant due to casualisation of labour.

The study has established that under such a situation, students are then forced to search for another placement, which at times could be completely different from the former. A student would spend a lot more time trying to adjust to the new environment at the expense of acquiring knowledge and skills relevant to one's field.

#### **4.7 Inadequate and/or poor mentorship**

Another challenge confronted by students on work related learning has been the notion of lowly qualified mentors. Students argued that in some instances, they were supervised by mentors who were not in possession of a university degree.

*In some cases, we are just on our own, no mentors, we learn through trial and error on our own. When mentors are there, at times, they are just ignorant, they also do not know what should be done, and they also need help and mentoring.* Participant 13.

In this case, mentors are just on paper but practically, some students were not being mentored at all. They are left to learn and discover on their own through trial and error. Bukaliya (2012:120) in agreement with the findings of this study has it that students on work related learning were in many occasions treated like full time staff. Instead of learning, these students were providing cheap labour to the organisations they were attached to. This could be linked to the poor economic performance, forcing organisations to hire less full time employees and maximise on students on internship programmes. It is also possible that some of the mentors are not adequately paid, therefore could not be motivated to diligently guide the students under their supervision.

Key informant four and five were however quick to refute the non-existence of mentors in organisations. Key informant four argued;

*Students have a tendency of applying a lot of weight on academic papers; they look down upon employees with lower qualifications but have gained a lot experience with time. Some are holders of diplomas yet have more than 20 years of experience. Students will say no to such mentors.* Key informant 4.

On a similar note, key informant two highlights that students on attachment must appreciate employees who are in an organisation although they may not have attained a university degree. She argued that such personnel have gathered the necessary skills, knowledge and abilities, and interns may tap from these individuals.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Although there can be benefits accrued during internship programmes, the study has revealed that intern students operating in an economically unstable environment face some unique challenges ranging from finding an intern placement to possible abuse as well as engaging in work that is not in line with their respective fields. As the economic challenges

take its toll on some organisations, students attached to these organisations are equally affected as they must start again with another organisation.

The study has also established that in as much as organisations are bridging the gap between theory and practice in tertiary education in Zimbabwe, some of them are seen to be taking advantage of the availability of intern students for free labour. Some organisations are engaging in flexible resourcing at the expense of students on work-related-learning. In a related development, the study has also expanded existing models on flexible resourcing to include students on attachment but allowing a mutually beneficial relationship between students and organisations.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Although there is a convergence of literature on the benefits of internship programmes to different stakeholders, economically unstable environments have unique challenges for such programmes. To maximise on the potential benefits of internship programmes, organisations must come up with clearly spelt out policies specifically for student on work-related-learning. Such policies are instrumental in protecting these interns at the same time, defining the expected behaviour. These policies are important since students are not covered by the current Labour Act Chapter 28:01. On a similar note, the Ministry of Higher Education in Zimbabwe may significantly contribute to internship programmes by drawing a code of conduct which both organisations and students must abide by. Institutions of higher learning can also contribute by signing memorandums of understanding by different organisations which will eventually take their students on the parameters of the internship programmes. These recommendations if implemented may meaningfully address some of the challenges faced by interns on work-related-learning.

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