

Experiential Learning for Economic Participation: Assessing Skills Needs for Employability and Entrepreneurship at MKRI

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Abstract

This study investigates the skills needs of interns at the Moses Kotane Research Institute (MKRI) to inform the design of a structured experiential learning programme that enhances economic participation through employability and entrepreneurship. Although interns enter the programme with academic qualifications, they display varying levels of practical, interpersonal, self-management, and entrepreneurial skills essential for workplace success or enterprise creation. A quantitative survey was administered to 34 respondents, comprising 28 Experiential Learners (82.4%) and 6 Research Assistants (17.6%), capturing self-reported confidence levels, existing competencies, and perceived development needs across interpersonal, professional, and entrepreneurial domains.

Results indicate that interns possess moderate-to-high confidence in teamwork, listening, and responsibility, but lower confidence in verbal communication, conflict resolution, time management, initiative, and opportunity identification. Development needs were highest in entrepreneurial skills, including innovation, planning and managing resources, risk awareness, and opportunity recognition. Paired samples t-tests confirmed statistically significant skills gaps in interpersonal and self-management domains, while entrepreneurial confidence closely aligned with perceived development needs. Priority skills for programme focus were communication (64.7%), teamwork (52.9%), and opportunity identification (50%).

The study concludes that MKRI requires a structured, non-negotiable experiential learning framework, incorporating targeted skills modules, practical project-based learning, mentorship, and measurable assessments. Implementing this approach will strengthen interns' employability and entrepreneurial readiness, improve research output quality, and contribute to sustainable economic participation. These findings highlight the importance of systematic experiential learning as a tool for capacity building in early-career research and public sector development initiatives.

Keywords: Experiential Learning, Employability, Entrepreneurship, Workforce Readiness, Public Sector Internships, Economic Participation

Introduction

Experiential learning has emerged as a critical pedagogical approach for bridging the gap between academic knowledge and practical workplace competencies, particularly in contexts where employability and entrepreneurship are central to economic participation (Kolb, 2015; Beard & Wilson, 2013). The Moses Kotane Research Institute (MKRI) provides a structured internship programme aimed at capacitating early-career graduates through two-year experiential placements. While interns enter the programme with formal academic qualifications, there is considerable variation in the practical and soft skills they possess, such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and entrepreneurial capabilities. This variation may constrain

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their ability to fully engage in the labour market or pursue self-employment opportunities, highlighting a critical need for a structured skills development framework.

Despite the recognised importance of experiential learning, MKRI currently lacks an official, systematic programme that identifies priority skills, prescribes methods for skill development, and measures outcomes. This gap limits the organisation's ability to optimise interns' economic participation and may result in missed opportunities for both personal and organisational growth. Understanding the skills gaps and learning needs of interns is therefore essential for designing a targeted experiential learning framework that enhances employability and entrepreneurial readiness.

This study seeks to assess the existing competencies and development needs of MKRI interns and research assistants, identify priority skills for economic participation, and provide evidence-based recommendations for structuring a non-negotiable experiential learning programme. The research addresses key questions regarding current skills, perceived skill gaps, and strategies to effectively cultivate capabilities that enable interns to contribute meaningfully to the economy through employment or enterprise creation.

Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) (Kolb, 1984), Human Capital Theory, and the Employability Skills Framework. Together, these theories help to conceptualise how interns at MKRI acquire and apply the skills necessary for labour-market participation and entrepreneurship.

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT)

Experiential Learning Theory posits that learning occurs through a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Internships and workplace-based learning environments are central to this cycle because they provide real-world exposure that transforms theoretical knowledge into practical competence.

For MKRI interns, the absence of a structured programme limits their progression through the experiential learning cycle. A structured learning framework ensures that learners receive guided experiences, opportunities for reflection, and structured feedback, enabling deeper learning and development of workplace skills (Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory argues that investment in skills through education and training increases individuals' productivity, employability, and earning potential (Becker, 1993). Soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving—constitute key elements of human capital that are critical for both employment and entrepreneurship (Heckman & Kautz, 2012). This theory supports the rationale for developing a structured experiential learning programme at MKRI, as such investment enhances interns' economic participation and contributes to broader workforce development objectives in the province.

Employability Skills Framework

Employability is understood as a combination of knowledge, skills, behaviours, and attributes that enable individuals to secure and sustain employment (Yorke, 2006). Employability models emphasise transferable skills such as interpersonal communication, self-management, and cognitive abilities. Within the South African context, the DHET and the National Skills Development Plan (NSDP) highlight experiential learning as essential for bridging the gap between education and labour-market readiness (DHET, 2020). Thus, designing an MKRI-specific framework aligns with national priorities to capacitate young graduates.

Entrepreneurship Competence Theory

Entrepreneurial competences, such as opportunity recognition, creativity, resilience, and risk-taking, are developed through practice and exposure rather than theory alone (Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2010). Experiential learning provides the space to practise these competencies through real projects and mentorship. This theoretical lens supports the study's focus on identifying entrepreneurial skill needs for interns who wish to pursue self-employment or venture creation.

Literature Review

Experiential Learning and Skills Development

Experiential learning plays a critical role in preparing graduates for the labour market. Research consistently shows that internships help develop workplace-relevant skills, improve job readiness, and reduce the mismatch between qualifications and employer expectations (Tymon, 2013). However, the effectiveness of internships depends on their structure, mentorship quality, and alignment with learning outcomes (Patrick et al., 2009). In many African contexts, the lack of structured experiential learning contributes to youth unemployment, despite increasing levels of tertiary education attainment (Cloete, 2015). Structured experiential programmes therefore bridge the skills gap by offering guided, real-world learning experiences.

Soft Skills for Employability

Soft skills, also known as transferable or non-technical skills, are increasingly recognised as essential for employability (Robles, 2012). Employers globally report deficits in communication, teamwork, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving among young graduates (World Economic Forum, 2020). Studies confirm that graduates who possess strong interpersonal and communication skills are more likely to secure employment, adapt to workplace cultures, and perform effectively in teams (Andrews & Higson, 2008). In the South African labour market, soft skills gaps remain a persistent barrier to youth employment, particularly in public-sector workplaces that require professionalism, communication, and administrative competence (CHE, 2016).

Skills for Entrepreneurship and Economic Participation

Entrepreneurship has been promoted as a key driver of economic participation for youth in South Africa. Entrepreneurial success requires competencies such as creativity, innovation, opportunity recognition, financial literacy, and resilience (Fatoki, 2014). Although universities offer entrepreneurship education, many graduates lack the practical experience, confidence, and applied skills required to translate ideas into viable ventures (Herrington & Kew, 2018). Workplace-based experiential learning provides a platform to develop

entrepreneurial thinking through exposure to project management, research, stakeholder engagement, and problem-solving, competencies relevant for enterprise creation.

Structured Internship Models

International literature emphasises that internships without structure result in inconsistent learning, limited skills transfer, and poor outcomes (Jackson, 2015). Effective models include Clearly defined competencies and learning outcomes, Mentorship and regular supervision, Assessment frameworks, Reflection activities and Project-based assignments. Such structured models increase interns' confidence and facilitate the development of employability skills (Smith et al., 2014). This supports the study's hypothesis that structured mentorship positively influences interns' confidence in skill development.

South African Policy Context

South Africa's National Development Plan (NDP 2030) emphasises skills development, experiential learning, research capacity, and entrepreneurship as key pathways to economic inclusion. Similarly, the National Skills Development Plan (NSDP 2030) prioritises work-integrated learning (WIL) as essential for transition into employment (DHET, 2020). Public entities like MKRI therefore play a critical role in implementing structured experiential programmes aligned with national agendas.

Identified Gaps

The literature reveals several gaps that justify the study (i) interns often enter workplaces with academic knowledge but limited practical skills. (ii) Soft skills are insufficiently taught at tertiary level. (iii) Entrepreneurship education lacks practical, experiential components. (iv) South Africa's public sector lacks structured frameworks for experiential learning within research institutions. This highlights the need for MKRI to design a structured skills programme informed by evidence of interns' current competencies and learning needs.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research design to assess the skills, competencies, and development needs of Experiential Learners and Research Assistants at the Moses Kotane Research Institute (MKRI). A quantitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to measure interns' confidence levels, identify skills gaps, and determine priority learning needs through numerical data that could be statistically analysed. The design enabled the researcher to examine patterns across interpersonal, self-management, and entrepreneurial skill domains and to draw objective conclusions that inform the development of a structured experiential learning programme for economic participation.

Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of 44 participants, including Experiential Learners and Research Assistants enrolled in MKRI's early-career development programmes. Given the relatively small population size, the study adopted a census sampling approach, inviting all 44 individuals to participate. This approach ensured

comprehensive coverage of the programme's participants and strengthened the representativeness of the findings.

A total of 34 respondents completed the survey, representing a response rate of 77%. The remaining 10 potential respondents were unavailable due to fieldwork commitments, leave, or limited access during the data collection period. Despite this, the achieved sample provided adequate representation for deriving insights into the current skills profile and learning needs of MKRI interns.

Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire designed by the researcher. The instrument consisted of four main sections: (i) Demographic Information (e.g., age, gender, qualifications, field of study, unit placement). (ii) Interpersonal and Communication Skills (confidence and development needs). (iii) Self-Management and Professional Skills (confidence and development needs). (iv) Entrepreneurial and Economic Participation Skills (confidence and development needs). Items assessing confidence and perceived development needs were measured using a five-point Likert scale, where respondents rated the extent of their confidence (1 = Not Confident to 5 = Very Confident) and development needs (1 = Not Needed to 5 = Very Needed). The survey was administered electronically to facilitate ease of access and timely responses.

Data Collection Procedure

Following ethical approval and internal clearance, the questionnaire link was disseminated to all targeted participants via email and WhatsApp communication channels. Respondents were informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and assurances of anonymity and confidentiality. Participation required approximately 10–15 minutes. Data collection occurred over a two-week period to allow for sufficient follow-up and accommodate interns involved in fieldwork assignments.

Data Analysis

Data were exported into Microsoft Excel and analysed using descriptive statistical methods. Analysis involved computation of frequencies, percentages, mean scores, and comparative summaries across the three skill domains. These descriptive statistics were used to: (i) assess interns' confidence in their existing skills, (ii) identify the skills they consider most important for employability and entrepreneurship, and (iii) determine priority development areas for MKRI's experiential learning programme. The analysis focused on identifying gaps between interns' current competencies and the skills they wished to develop, thereby generating evidence to inform the design of a structured skills development framework.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to standard ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained electronically before respondents commenced the survey. Participation was voluntary, and respondents could withdraw at any point without penalty. No personal identifiers were collected, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. Data were securely stored and used solely for the purposes of this research.

Analysis of Survey Results

A total of 34 respondents participated in the survey out of the 44 Experiential Learners and Research Assistants targeted. The difference is due to several individuals being unavailable because of leave, fieldwork activities, or limited contact during the data-collection period.

Of the respondents, 82.4% (n = 28) were Experiential Learners, while 17.6% (n = 6) were Research Assistants. This distribution reflects MKRI's staffing composition, where Experiential Learners form the majority of early-career personnel. The results therefore predominantly reflect their experiences and development needs, which is an important consideration for programme planning.

Most respondents fell within the 25–34-year age group (67.6%, n = 23), consistent with the typical age range of young professionals participating in MKRI's development programmes. The 18–24 age group accounted for 14.7% (n = 5), representing recent graduates. Respondents aged 35–44 comprised 11.8% (n = 4), and only 5.9% (n = 2) were in the 45–54 age bracket. This distribution aligns with the youth-focused nature of the Experiential Learning and Research Assistant initiatives.

Male respondents represented 61.8% (n = 21) of the sample, while females accounted for 38.2% (n = 13). This pattern mirrors trends in MKRI's early-career workforce, particularly in technical and research-oriented roles. Notwithstanding this imbalance, the strong representation of female respondents reflects reasonable gender diversity across the programme.

Respondents demonstrated high levels of post-school educational achievement. The largest proportion held a Diploma (44.1%, n = 15), followed by those with a Bachelor's Degree (17.6%, n = 6). A notable number had postgraduate qualifications: (i) Honours: 11.8% (n = 4), (ii) Masters: 11.8% (n = 4), (iii) Doctoral/PhD: 5.9% (n = 2). This means 29.5% of respondents possessed postgraduate degrees, reflecting a strong academic foundation. Smaller proportions held Matric (2.9%, n = 1) or a Certificate (5.9%, n = 2). Overall, the qualifications profile indicates that MKRI's early-career staff are well-positioned to support research and analytical functions.

All respondents (100%, n = 34) reported that they do not identify as persons living with a disability. Although no disability representation was captured in this sample, the finding underscores the importance of ensuring that MKRI's internship and employment processes remain inclusive and accessible.

Geographic Distribution (District of Birth)

Most respondents were born in KwaZulu-Natal, with a small proportion (8.8%, n = 3) originating outside the province, specifically Gauteng (City of Tshwane), Mpumalanga, and the Alfred Nzo District in the Eastern Cape. This suggests that MKRI's programmes attract young professionals from both within and beyond KZN, contributing to a broader diversity of experiences and perspectives.

Academic Fields of Study

Respondents came from a wide range of academic fields. The most represented disciplines were: Business, Commerce & Management: 32.4% (n = 11), Information Technology, Data & Computer Science: 29.4% (n = 10), and Economics & Finance: 17.6% (n = 6). Smaller proportions came from Public Administration, Social

Sciences, Education, Engineering, and Law. These patterns align with MKRI's multidisciplinary research needs while highlighting strong representation in business, IT, and economics—fields essential for research, analytics, and development work.

Distribution by MKRI Services Unit

Respondents were spread across several units. The majority (61.8%, $n = 21$) were placed within the Research Services Unit, demonstrating its reliance on interns and research assistants for core project delivery. The Development Services Unit accounted for 23.5% ($n = 8$), while Finance Services (11.8%, $n = 4$) and Governance Services (2.9%, $n = 1$) were less represented. This distribution reflects MKRI's operational focus on research and development activities.

Confidence Analysis

Respondents reported moderate to high confidence across interpersonal, self-management, and entrepreneurial skills, with mean scores ranging between 3.41 and 4.12. Interpersonal and communication skills and the strongest confidence areas were: Teamwork ($M = 4.09$), Listening ($M = 4.06$) and Responsibility & Accountability ($M = 4.12$). Comparatively lower confidence was observed in Clear verbal communication ($M = 3.79$) and Conflict resolution ($M = 3.79$). These results suggest a solid interpersonal foundation but potential need for support in communication clarity and conflict-handling skills. Self-Management & Professional Skills.

High confidence was recorded in adaptability & Flexibility ($M = 3.94$) and Organisation & Planning ($M = 3.85$). Lower relative confidence appeared in time management ($M = 3.74$), Initiative & Proactiveness ($M = 3.65$), Entrepreneurial & Innovation Skills. Confidence in entrepreneurial skills was generally moderate. Stronger areas included understanding economic impact ($M = 3.65$) and innovation for project/business ideas ($M = 3.62$), while lower confidence areas included risk awareness & calculated risk-taking ($M = 3.41$) and identifying opportunities ($M = 3.50$). These indicate limited exposure to entrepreneurial environments and practical innovation scenarios.

Confidence in Interpersonal & Communication Skills

Most respondents reported moderate to high confidence in writing, teamwork, and listening. Clear verbal communication and conflict resolution had the highest proportion of moderate and low confidence ratings, indicating key areas where further support is needed.

Confidence in Self-Management Skills

Respondents expressed strong confidence in responsibility, adaptability, and organisation. However, time management and initiative showed weaker confidence levels, with some respondents indicating challenges in task prioritisation, workload management, and proactive behaviour.

Confidence in Entrepreneurial & Economic Participation Skills

Moderate confidence levels were reported across entrepreneurial competencies. The weakest confidence appeared in opportunity identification and risk-taking, highlighting a need for exposure to business thinking, innovation processes, and project viability assessment.

Development Need Analysis

Development needs were generally high across all assessed skills, with mean scores ranging between 3.15 and 3.65. The strongest development needs were concentrated in entrepreneurial skills: innovation for project/business ideas ($M = 3.65$), planning and managing resources ($M = 3.59$), risk awareness & calculated risk-taking ($M = 3.56$) and identifying opportunities ($M = 3.53$). Conflict resolution ($M = 3.53$) also emerged as a notable development need, consistent with the low confidence reported earlier. The lowest development need was for responsibility and accountability ($M = 3.15$), which aligns with high confidence levels in this skill.

Development Needs in Interpersonal & Communication Skills

Clear verbal communication and conflict resolution were the areas with the highest development need, with most respondents indicating that these skills are either Needed or Very Needed. Writing and listening also showed moderate development need, while teamwork presented the lowest need due to respondents' existing confidence in collaborative settings.

Development Needs in Self-Management Skills

The strongest need in this domain was for Organisation and Planning, followed closely by Initiative and Proactiveness. Time management also reflected substantial development need, reinforcing the pattern seen in the confidence results. Adaptability recorded moderate need, whereas responsibility and accountability remained the lowest need.

Development Needs in Entrepreneurial & Economic Participation Skills

This domain recorded the highest development needs in the survey. Respondents expressed particularly strong demand for support in: innovation and creative problem-solving, resource planning and project management, risk assessment and decision-making, opportunity identification and understanding project economic impact. These patterns highlight significant gaps in entrepreneurial readiness and suggest priority areas for MKRI's capacity-building programmes.

Conclusion

This study set out to assess the skills, competencies, and developmental needs of Experiential Learners and Research Assistants at the Moses Kotane Research Institute (MKRI) to inform the creation of a structured experiential learning programme that enhances employability and entrepreneurship. The findings revealed that while interns possess strong foundational interpersonal and self-management skills, significant gaps exist in entrepreneurial competencies, communication clarity, conflict resolution, and proactive behaviors. These gaps indicate that interns require more targeted, practical, and systematic support to fully participate in the labour market and to meaningfully engage in entrepreneurial activities.

The results further demonstrated that interns' desire for development in key skill areas is consistently higher than their current confidence levels, suggesting a clear demand for structured capacity-building interventions. High development needs were particularly pronounced in opportunity identification, innovation for business or project ideas, resource planning, and risk assessment. These areas are essential for economic participation

in both employment and enterprise creation, reinforcing the importance of a deliberate learning structure within the internship programme.

Overall, the study concludes that MKRI would benefit from implementing a comprehensive experiential learning framework that integrates technical skills, soft skills, and entrepreneurial development. Such a framework should prioritise practical training, mentorship, reflective learning, and hands-on project experience to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and workplace readiness. By institutionalising a clear skills development pathway, MKRI can enhance the effectiveness of its internship programme, improve youth employability, and cultivate future-oriented skills that empower interns to contribute meaningfully to the economy—either as employees or as emerging entrepreneurs.

The research therefore provides evidence-based guidance for MKRI to establish a non-negotiable, structured experiential learning programme that is aligned with organisational needs, labour market demands, and broader national objectives for youth economic participation. Future research may explore longitudinal tracking of interns to measure the long-term impact of such a programme on employment outcomes, career progression, and entrepreneurial success.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to MKRI to enhance the effectiveness of its experiential learning programme and ensure that interns are adequately prepared for employability and entrepreneurship:

Develop a Structured Experiential Learning Programme

Establish a formal, non-negotiable skills development framework that integrates the core competencies identified as priorities: communication, teamwork, opportunity identification, innovation, and critical thinking. Design modular training sessions that combine theoretical knowledge with practical, hands-on exercises to reinforce learning.

Implement Targeted Skill Development Modules

Communication & Professional Writing: Focus on verbal articulation, presentation skills, report writing, and business correspondence. **Conflict Resolution & Interpersonal Skills:** Provide scenario-based simulations and role-playing exercises to build negotiation and collaboration capabilities. **Self-Management & Professional Skills:** Include planning, organisation, time management, adaptability, and proactive decision-making workshops. **Entrepreneurial & Innovation Skills:** Introduce modules on opportunity recognition, resource planning, risk assessment, and understanding the economic impact of projects.

Enhance Mentorship and Coaching Opportunities

Pair interns with experienced researchers and managers for guidance, feedback, and reflection on practical assignments. Facilitate peer-to-peer learning sessions to foster collaborative problem-solving and knowledge sharing.

Incorporate Practical, Project-Based Learning

Assign mini-projects, rotations across units, and entrepreneurial simulations to provide real-world exposure and reinforce applied skills.

Establish a Measurable Skill Development Pathway

Conduct pre-assessments, mid-term evaluations, and final assessments to monitor progress, identify gaps, and adjust the programme accordingly.

Promote Inclusive Recruitment and Participation

Continue efforts to attract a diverse pool of interns, including individuals from underrepresented backgrounds and those with disabilities, to strengthen equity and broaden perspectives within the programme. Implementing these recommendations will enable MKRI to cultivate a workforce of well-rounded, confident, and economically active early-career professionals, aligning with the organisation's mandate to contribute to socio-economic development in KwaZulu-Natal.

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