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Workplace learning: an empirical evaluation of graduate development programmes for black engineers in South Africa

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Abstract

The purpose and motivation of this research is to evaluate the effectiveness of graduate development programmes and workplace learning for African, Coloured and Indian engineering graduates. The concept of learning has long been associated with classroom-like activities. Its use in the context of work has, however, sparked an interest for many scholars as will be deliberated in this study. Research on the transition of graduates into the world of work indicates that a gap exists between the competencies required at work and the skills acquired by graduates through university. Therefore, this necessitates the need to examine workplace learning and graduate development programmes as tools that can be utilised to facilitate the transition process of new graduates to the workplace.

This study has employed a mixed methods research design by incorporating both qualitative and quantitative research approaches. The researcher conducted an evaluation of graduate development programmes by using a sample size of 10 qualitative study participants and 130 quantitative study participants from five different companies representing different industries. The sample was gathered through the use of non-probability sampling procedure which involved sampling techniques such as purposive, snowball and convenience sampling. The research participants included graduates who partake in graduate development programmes, as well as their mentors and senior managers. Research data was gathered by means of semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire. The discussion in this study relates to the nature of graduate development programmes at different organisations and how these programmes drive workplace learning. Content from the semi-structured interviews were thematically analysed in order to provide structure and logic to the data. The research findings suggest that graduate development programmes promote workplace learning and that the effectiveness of these programmes is dependent on coaching and mentoring relationships which have an effect on the career progression of graduates, and eventually their retention in their respective organisations. The study has addressed the quantitative part of the research by employing descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. The content form of the questionnaires indicate that there is positive correlation between research variables as hypothesised in the study. This study is of value to organisations that run graduate development programmes and wish to improve on their effectiveness and have an understanding of how to develop and retain their graduates.