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Learning and employability in the environment sector: a case of an internship programme implemented by the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA)

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ABSTRACT

This study was concerned with the concept of employability, which is to a large extent informed by a human capital assumption, which suggests that an educated individual stands a better chance of gaining employment than one who is not. The proponents of the theory assumed that, for a nation to prosper economically and experience improved social welfare, investment in the knowledge, skills and capabilities of the working population is vital. This human capital assumption presupposed that there was a causal relationship between education and work. However, recent studies in countries such as the United Kingdom, the OECD and South Africa have shown that the employer model of employability has dominated employability discourse, defining what employability is and the associated knowledge and skills graduates were expected to possess.

This model of employability had allowed both employers and the government to set the agenda and policy direction. According to Hesketh (2000), large employers have dominated debates about employability and redefined the meaning of skills and the knowledge and personal characteristics needed for employment. Consequently, employability issues were taken on board and embedded into the curriculum to produce a skilled workforce (Clarke, 2008).

Hence, employers, in partnership with the government, developed policies geared to advance their vested interests. In effect, the education-to-work transition studies mostly centred on employer-dominant positions because they had the power to recruit, employ and develop the workforce. Thus, graduates' voices, experiences and perspectives were ignored in transition studies.

According to Sweet (2001), such studies show how graduates use the learning pathways to gain access to employment. Hence, the research on the employability of graduates was based on their perspectives, using the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA), internship programmes (2013-2016) as a case and how it enhanced their employability.

The study suggests that there might not be a direct relationship between education and work as suggested by human capital theory. Hence, based on the accounts by interns there was no linear pathway, no immediate financial returns as suggested by the proponents of the human capital theory. Furthermore, not all of the graduate interns had benefitted immediately from their investment in education post-DEA internship. This research, therefore, suggests an employability model for future consideration and recommends an inclusive approach. The study recommends that graduates, employers, workplaces, higher education researchers and practitioners across all disciplinary boundaries work together to come up with a common conceptual framework.

Keywords: human capital theory; employability; skills; learning pathways.