Beyond Academia: Why Investing in Graduate Internships Drives Youth Employability

by **Abisoye Ajose** *[November 2026]*



Image source: Cross section of Mastercard Foundation Associates Program 2024 participants, LEAP Africa team and Mastercard Foundation team during Brown Bag event held in Accra Photo: LEAP Africa.

Africa's Youth Employability Challenge:

Every year, roughly 10 to 12 million young Africans enter the labour market, yet the continent creates only about three million formal jobs, according to the African Development Bank.[1] Across the continent, about one in four young people aged between 15 and 24 years are not in employment, education or training.[2] Joblessness is only half the story. Employers consistently report that graduates arrive without the skills work demands:

[1] https://www.afdb.org/en/topics-and-sectors/topics/youth

[2] Niall O'Higgins 2025 Measuring what matters: NEET vs youth unemployment International Labour Organisation

problem-solving, communication, teamwork, digital literacy and basic workplace discipline.[3,4]

Degrees certify knowledge; they rarely certify readiness for work. According to The Mastercard Foundation Africa Youth Employment Outlook report, over 10 million young people enter Africa's labor market every year, while current growth patterns generate only about 3 million formal jobs.[5] These reports underscore the gap between the skills graduates bring and the skills employers need.

Bridging the Gap Between Employability and Workplace Skills

A well-structured graduate internship is often the first rung on the career ladder, providing graduates with six to twelve months of practical experience to translate academic knowledge into workplace competencies.

Through their assigned roles, graduate interns gain hands-on experience in diverse areas, including data collection and analysis, project planning, implementation and reporting and several others. These responsibilities expose them to real workplace expectations, allowing them to apply their knowledge, work with digital tools, manage deadlines and take ownership of assigned tasks.

Working alongside experienced professionals and supervisors, graduate interns develop essential transferable skills, including communication, teamwork, problem-solving, critical thinking, adaptability, time management and accountability which enables them to build professional relationships and respond effectively to workplace challenges.

Ultimately, graduate internships bridge the experience gap by equipping young people with practical skills, professional networks and workplace confidence that enhance their employability and ease their transition into sustainable employment.

Proven Models: Graduate Internships That Have Worked in Africa

The Mastercard Foundation Associates Program offers a practical example of how structured graduate internships can strengthen youth employability across Africa. Through 12-month paid work placements, the programme connects talented young graduates with organisations where they gain hands-on experience, mentorship and professional development. Since 2023, more than 1,000 Associates across 22 countries have participated, including young women, persons with disabilities, refugees and internally displaced persons.[6] The programme forms part of the Foundation's Young Africa Works strategy, which seeks to enable 30 million young Africans to access dignified and fulfilling work by 2030.

In Nigeria, LEAP Africa serves as a Central Partner of the Mastercard Foundation and hosts Associates within its organisation. Through hands-on involvement in youth development programmes and organisational activities, Associates gain practical experience, mentorship, professional networks and transferable skills that strengthen their career prospects. This partnership demonstrates how local organisations can expand access to meaningful work experience while nurturing a skilled workforce.

Additionally, South Africa's World Wide fund for Nature,[7] Rwanda National Internship

[3] Pitan, OS and Adedeji, SO (2012). 'Skills Mismatch among University Graduates in the Nigerian Labour Market' Journal of US-China Education Review, 2, pp. 90–98.

[4] Dabalen A, Oni B and Adekola, OA (2000): Labour Market Prospects for University Graduates in Nigeria. The Nigeria University System Innovation Project Study.

[5] Mastercard Foundation Africa Youth Employment Outlook 2026

[6] Mastercard Foundation Associate Program

[7] WWF celebrates a decade of Internship success

Programme,[8] and Kenya's Presidential Digital Talent Programme[9] gives graduates their first exposure to work, including building Information Communication and Technology skills through placements. The lesson is clear: where internships are paid, structured and linked to real employers, they shorten the journey from graduation to employment.

Why Graduate Internship Investment in Pays Off

Graduate Internships are among the most cost-effective employment interventions available. They increase graduates' chances of being hired, often by the host organisation itself. They give firms a pipeline of trained, tested talent at modest cost. Graduate Internship programmes also reduce the economic and social toll of idle youth, from lost productivity to frustration and forced migration.

Recommendations:

Create an Enabling Policy and Incentive Environment for Graduate Internships: Governments should introduce targeted tax incentives, wage subsidies and other policy measures that encourage businesses to create paid graduate internship opportunities. Such investments can help reduce the cost of hiring young graduates while incentivising employers to contribute meaningfully to youth employment and workforce development.

Reposition Internships as Strategic Talent Development Pathways: Employers must move beyond viewing internships as temporary support roles and recognise them as strategic investments in future talent. This requires providing graduates with meaningful work experience, structured mentorship, clearly defined learning objectives and opportunities to develop practical, industry-relevant skills that improve their transition into full-time employment.

Strengthen University-Industry Partnerships to Bridge the Skills Gap: Universities should deepen collaboration with employers to integrate structured internship placements, practical learning and industry exposure into academic programmes. This will help align graduate competencies with evolving labour market demands and ensure that young people enter the workforce better prepared to navigate employment opportunities.

Mobilise Development Partnerships and Strengthen Evidence of Impact: Foundations and development partners should expand successful graduate internship models, support small and medium-sized enterprises to host interns, and invest in sustainable partnerships that broaden access to quality placements. Equally important is the need to establish robust monitoring frameworks that track outcomes beyond internship completion, particularly employment and job retention rates within six months. This evidence should inform programme improvements, guide resource allocation and ensure that investments are directed towards models that deliver measurable employment outcomes.

Conclusion:

Graduate internships should be seen not as an add-on to academic learning or a stopgap job scheme, but as a strategic investment in Africa's youth future workforce. With the right government incentives, meaningful employer placements, strong university-industry links and scalable models from development partners, graduate internships can bridge education and employment, turning work experience into a clear, lasting pathway to decent jobs.

[8] About the Internship programme

[9] Presidential Digital Talent Programme