**Work Exposure for Graduates through the WRC’s Water Graduate Employment Programme (Water GEP)**

*Written by Ms Vimbai Mahowa (Water GEP graduate)*

The theme of employment has once again taken the lead in the international and local development agenda, resultant from the global economic and COVID-19 impacts. Consequently, high unemployment rates in South Africa have been intensified – a challenge prior to COVID-19. Unemployment of graduates in South Africa was stated at 33% in 2019. As is shown in most developing countries, unemployment among young people is even higher than for the labour force as a whole.

The Water Research Commission with support from the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI) has rolled-out the Water Graduate Employability Programme (Water GEP) as part of the Presidential Economic Stimulus Plan that aims to create a mechanism to address capacity and work exposure of unemployed youth, specifically graduates.

The Water GEP is a short-term pilot programme aimed at graduates who are looking to make a contribution to the water and sanitation sector in areas such as water treatment, quality, sanitation, innovation, ecological infrastructure, data science, climate change, agriculture, green markets, ICT, water finance and economics. The main objective of the programme is to develop the next generation of innovators and thought leaders in emerging knowledge areas; expand work exposure and experience through access to employers and meaningful work; and improve graduate employability through an integrated approach.

Given that, there’s often a mismatch between skill levels and available economic opportunities for young graduates, the Water GEP recognises that a greater investment is needed to enhance young people’s work exposure and employment opportunities in order to leverage the national investment in their human capital. Therefore, the selected graduates who will take part in the programme will be required to work through a structured 3 – 4 months workplan and are being matched with hosts and mentors across the country.

“The Water GEP has given me the opportunity to apply the skills and theories that l learnt in my tertiary education, it has enhanced my presentation and research skills. Through the program l am able to gain work experience and exposure that will form basis for my career” said Vimbai Mahowa.

Young women and men are constantly faced with age-specific difficulties when they are in the process of making the transition from tertiary education to work. Some of these challenges include lack of employment experience; strict labour market regulations; mismatch between youth skills and aspirations and labour market demand and realities, and constraints on self-employment and entrepreneurship development. The persistently high youth unemployment rate has long been one of the most pressing socio-economic problems in South Africa. And the socioeconomic repercussions of the pandemic are hitting young people everywhere faster and harder than other age groups. The Water GEP is just one mechanism that the WRC is piloting to address some of these challenges.

Potential hosts and mentors are welcome to engage with the Water GEP programme and can email Dr Chantal Ramcharan-Kotze