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Engaging graduate IT students to become social actors by researching the working conditions of South African platform workers

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Outline

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Project context and rationale

- Project context: ICT Management Masters degree programme @UP
- Students learn about digital and platform economies
- Typically, emphasis is on technology and business perspectives only
- Goal: wanted students to engage with socio-economic aspects of digital economy
- Group assignment based on international Fairwork project



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Background: Fairwork project

- Platform economy is an important source of employment in developing countries
- Platform workers not protected by labour legislation (classified as self-employed)
- Fair.work: Global initiative that evaluates the working conditions of digital platform workers
- Platforms scored on 5 principles of fair work
- South Africa a key player in formulating principles; participated in platform ratings since inception of project in 2019



Background: Fairwork project (2)

- The ILO also has a 'Decent Work' agenda/strategy *but the Fairwork project was a bit ahead of that* since it's much smaller and therefore can act more nimbly.
 - "G:ENESIS" is currently developing the ILO Decent Work framework in South Africa for the gig economy.



The Fairwork Principles

FAIRWORK has brought together platforms, workers, trade unions, regulators, and academics in meetings to set global principles for fair work in the platform economy. Five core principles emerged out of those workshops.

1

Fair Pay

Workers, irrespective of their employment classification, should earn a decent income in their home jurisdiction after taking account of work-related costs.

2

Fair Conditions

Platforms should have policies in place to protect workers from foundational risks arising from the processes of work.

3

Fair Contracts

Terms and conditions should be in-keeping with local law, and transparent, concise, and provided to workers in an accessible form.

4

Fair Management

There should be a clear and documented policy that ensures equity in the way workers are managed on a platform with a clear channel of communication for workers to appeal management decisions or deactivation.

5

Fair Representation

Irrespective of their employment classification, workers should have the right to organise in collective bodies, and platforms should be prepared to listen, cooperate and negotiate with them.

For each of the five Fairwork Principles, a basic point and an advanced point can be awarded to platforms, leading to a total fairness score out of ten.

Methods: Data Collection

Desk research

+

Worker interviews

+

Manager interviews

Map the largest and most influential platforms operating in each city, as well as identifying points of contact or ways to access workers

Interview 5-10 workers per platform. This allows us to understand the process of work and the ways it is carried out and managed, as well as confirm that policies are really in place on the platform

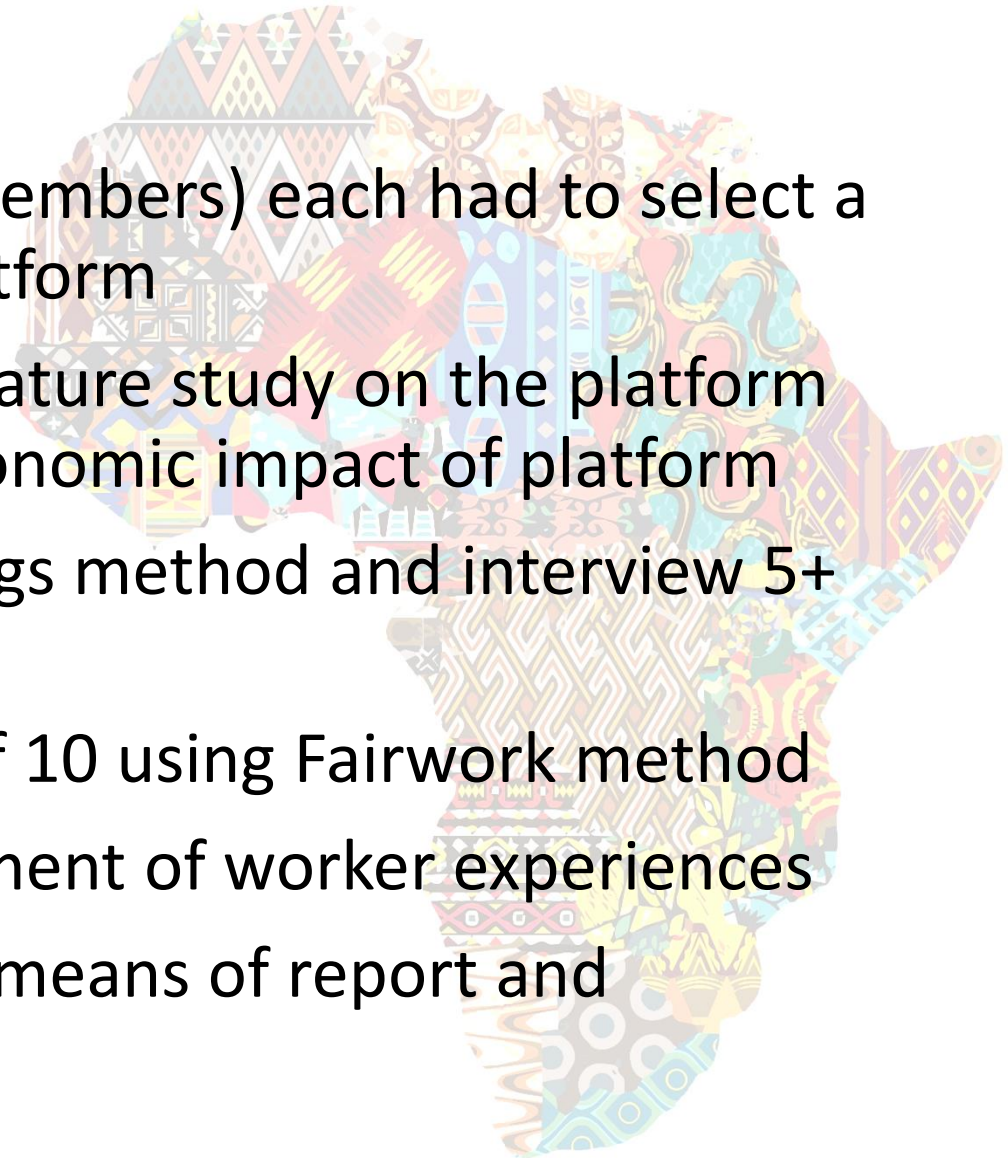
Interview platform managers and request evidence for each of the Fairwork principles. This provides insights into the operation and business model of the platform.

Putting it all together

Final scores are collectively decided by the Fairwork team based on all three forms of evidence. The scores are peer-reviewed by the country team, the Oxford team, and two reviewers from other Fairwork country teams.

MIT student assignment

- Student groups (4-5 members) each had to select a different SA digital platform
- Commenced with literature study on the platform type and the socio-economic impact of platform
- Applied Fairwork ratings method and interview 5+ platform workers
- Scored platform out of 10 using Fairwork method
- Did qualitative assessment of worker experiences
- Presented findings by means of report and presentation



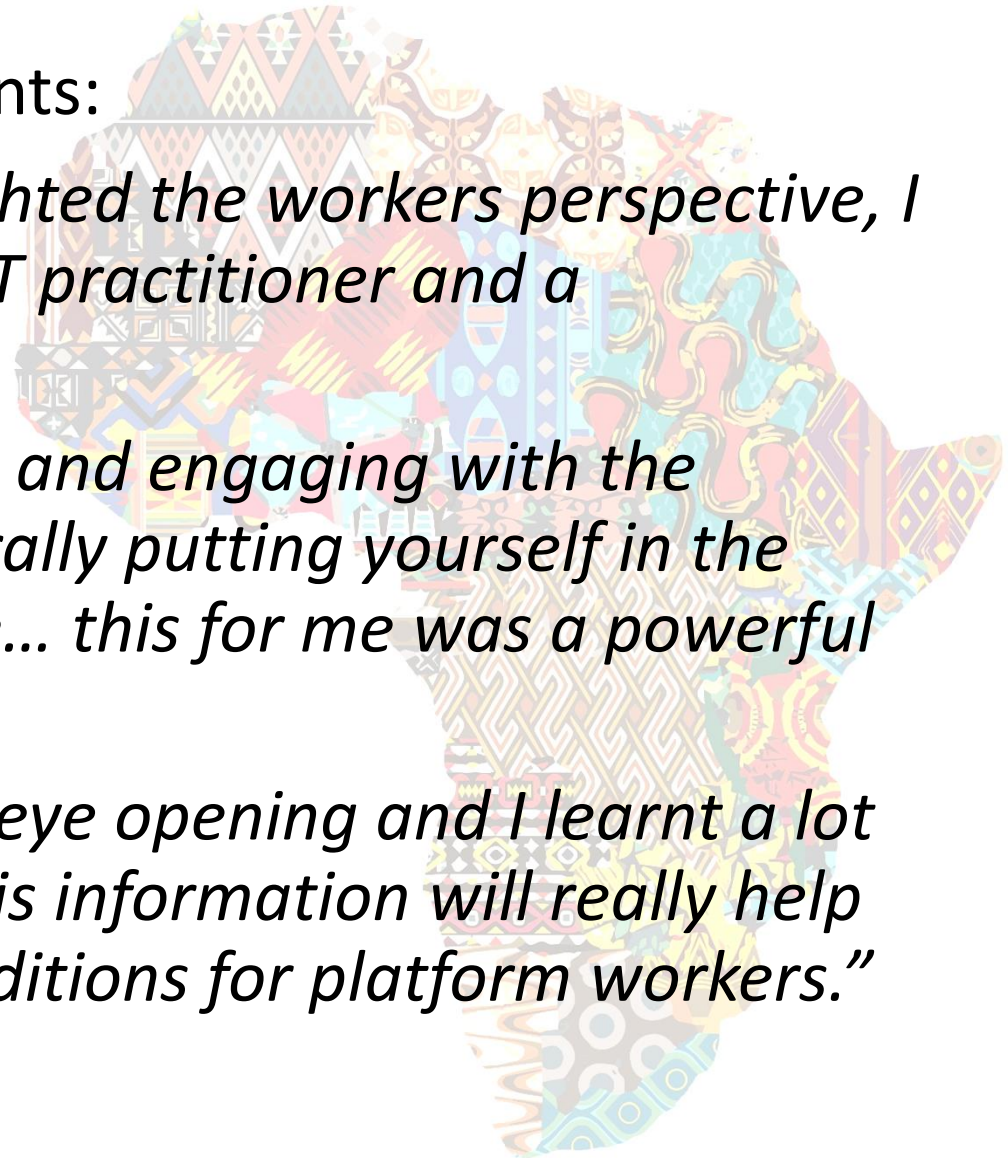
Assignment results



Fairwork Principle	Platform1 (Service rendering)	Platform5 (Service rendering)	Platform2 (Delivery)	Platform4 (E-hailing)	Platform3 (Delivery)	Platform6 (Delivery)	Platform7 (E-hailing)
1. Fair pay	2	2	1	1	1	2	1
2. Fair conditions	1	1	1	1	0	0	1
3. Fair contracts	2	1	2	1	0	0	0
4. Fair management	2	2	1	0	0	0	0
5. Fair representation	2	1	1	0	1	0	0
Total score /10	9	7	6	3	2	2	2

Reflection on learning

- Feedback from students:
- *“The research highlighted the workers perspective, I always think as an ICT practitioner and a consumer”*
- *“Being on the ground and engaging with the interviewees and literally putting yourself in the shoes of these people... this for me was a powerful exercise”*
- *“The experience was eye opening and I learnt a lot from it. I just wish this information will really help improve working conditions for platform workers.”*



Conclusion

- Assignment was perceived by students as challenging but meaningful
- Assignment helped to broaden the minds of the students, delivering graduates that are better informed of broader societal issues and with the ability to engage in those issues as informed citizens
- Recommended for ICT Management programmes to broaden their scope with an explicit focus on the socio-economic implications of new technologies

Questions?



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