

ILERA 2021 full paper, Conference track: 2.4

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

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Abstract

The platform or gig economy is growing very fast with tens of millions of people employed in the gig economy worldwide. In South Africa, the high unemployment rate and barriers restricting entry into the formal labour market, makes the gig economy potentially attractive to workers. However, since platform workers are treated as independent contractors, they are vulnerable to exploitation. This paper considers the inclusion of a platform economy theme within a Digital Economy Masters course at a South African university. In this course, students were given a group assignment where they had to interview platform workers in order to evaluate their work conditions. Students scored the associated platforms using the five Fairwork principles for decent work. The paper reports on the findings of the student assignment, as well its value in creating social awareness among ICT Management students.

1. Introduction

The platform economy has provided a new business model where consumers and suppliers are directly matched by means of a platform interface (Van Alstyne et al., 2016). In the case where the supply is services, consumers are matched with workers for the supply of short-term tasks (Rogers, 2016). Platform businesses do not regard their workers as employees but rather as independent contractors. While this arrangement allows for the flexibility required for the efficient and cost-effective functioning of platform businesses, it leaves workers with limited job security and leaves room for exploitation (Heeks et al., 2021, Rogers, 2016).

Degree programmes in information technology or ICT management typically focus on developments in technology as well as the management of technology from a business (employer or business owner) perspective. Furthermore, the socio-economic implications of new technologies, including aspects such as employment rates and employment conditions are typically neglected in ICT Management degrees.

This paper reports on a Digital Economy course presented as part of a coursework Masters in ICT programme at a South African university. Within this Digital Economy course, a sub-theme was earlier introduced to explicitly consider the socio-economic implications of the Digital Economy in a developing country context. In 2020, the sub-theme was expanded to a larger group assignment where students had to investigate the labour situation of South African platform workers. Each group had to select a digital platform and assess how the platform treated its workers, by applying five principles of fair work that were developed by the Fairwork Foundation (Graham et al., 2020). In this paper, the student assignment is discussed, with specific emphasis on the findings of

the assignment, namely how the seven platforms selected by the students performed on the Fairwork ratings scale.

The paper is structured as follows. In the Background section, the Fairwork Foundation is introduced as part of an argument for promoting decent gig work conditions in the Global South. The next section introduces the student group assignment in the context of the Digital Economy course and the encompassing ICT Management degree programme. Thereafter, the assignment results are discussed. We further present the results of a student feedback survey, where students responded on what they learnt during the assignment. Finally, we reflect on the value of incorporating an assignment such as the one discussed, in a course that forms part of an ICT Management degree programme.

2. Background

2.1 Promoting decent gig work conditions in the Global South

The platform economy has grown very quickly in recent years, and is estimated to employ tens of millions of workers (Heeks et al., 2021). A key enabler for the fast rise of digital labour platforms in South Africa is the very high official unemployment rate, which in the last quarter of 2020 stood at 32.5% (SSA, 2020). Unemployment especially impacts the young population, with more than 40% of people aged between 15-34 not in employment, education or training in the last quarter of 2020 (SSA, 2020). Over 2.5 million people are estimated to be working in the informal sector in the time period specified above (SSA, 2020). Additional factors driving growth in the South African gig economy are the high levels of urbanisation resulting in a concentration of supply and

demand, regulatory settings favouring entrepreneurship and innovation, a very high penetration of mobile phones, and a sophisticated connectivity infrastructure (Chidoori and Van Belle, 2020, Van Belle and Mudavanhu, 2018). Furthermore, South Africa is also characterized by huge income and wealth inequalities driving middle class demand for platform labour services supplied by low-income workers. Apart from race- and gender-based inequalities, South Africa also has a large migrant population, members of which also experience labour market discrimination and particularly high barriers to obtaining formal employment; and thus are overrepresented in the informal and platform economy.

Because of its connectivity infrastructure, favourable regulatory environment, and ongoing unemployment crisis, South Africa has not only offered a fertile ground for international platforms, such as Uber and Bolt to establish themselves in the market, but a critical mass of tech entrepreneurs has also given rise to an even larger number of locally-developed platforms, which organise the labour of a rapidly growing segment of the workforce. A rough pre-Covid19 estimate was that there are around 30,000 workers engaged in location-based platform work, and potentially a further 100,000 in online “cloudwork”, representing around 1% of workers in South Africa (Heeks, 2019). This number is likely to have increased further.

Government regulations and legislation have been slow to catch up with the rapid take-off of these platforms. Although there is a comprehensive body of labour legislation protecting employees, platforms have usually carefully positioned themselves to fall outside the scope of this legislation by classifying their workers as ‘self-employed’ rather than as employees (Fredman et al., 2020, Heeks et al., 2020). In line with the common

global practice of contractually classifying platform workers as independent, workers in the platform economy tend to experience a higher level of risk, vulnerability and insecurity. In South Africa, platform workers are excluded from key social protections including unemployment insurance, holiday pay, sick leave, and the ability to seek legal redress for, as an example, unfair deactivation of their account. Further contributing to aspects of injustice experienced by platform workers is the fact that the South African labour market is characterised by multifaceted dimensions of inequality, including geographical, racial and gendered (Leibbrandt et al., 2010). The platform economy intersects with these inequalities in specific ways. While digital labour platforms have the potential to provide decent work opportunities to those who need them, where the jobs created are characterised by low quality labour conditions and insecurity, platforms can serve to exacerbate existing inequalities and patterns of poverty and exclusion based on gender, race, or migration background.

These conditions made South Africa an appropriate country in which to pilot action research on labour conditions in the gig economy - especially in order to provide insight into the experience of gig workers in the Global South. The Fairwork project (<https://fair.work>), a global initiative based in Oxford and Berlin, evaluates the working conditions of digital platform workers. Five principles of fair platform work were developed through a series of multi-stakeholder workshops, which brought together platforms and workers in Cape Town and Johannesburg, alongside other cities, in 2018. These set benchmarks for fair pay, fair conditions, fair contracts, fair management, and fair representation for gig workers, which were in turn broken down into two thresholds, creating ten categories (Graham et al., 2020). Utilising this framework, a research team

consisting of academics from the Universities of Cape Town, the Western Cape, Oxford and Manchester, undertook action research in order to award the most prominent platforms operating in South Africa a score out of 10. The scores were displayed on a league table to highlight the best and worst labour practices in the South Africa platform economy. Data was collected through interviews with platform managers and platform workers, as well as independent desk research. The first league table was published in early 2019, featuring 10 platforms, including the international e-hailing giants Uber and Bolt, and local companies such as domestic work platform SweepSouth, and last mile delivery platform Picup. Fairwork South Africa has now completed in its third annual scoring cycle, with results published in July 2021 (Fairwork, 2021). To date, this method has also been applied to rate digital platforms in India, Chile, Ecuador, Germany and Indonesia (Heeks et al., 2021).

2.2 The Fairwork principles

The Fairwork method is based on the five principles of fair pay, fair conditions, fair contracts, fair management and fair representation. The Fairwork method works as follows. For each principle, a platform can score a maximum of 2 points. A platform has to comply with the requirements of the basic point before it can obtain a score for the advanced point (see Table 1).

Table 1: Fairwork principles and scoring system (Fairwork, 2020a).

Fairwork Principle	Threshold
1. Fair pay	Basic point: Pays at least the local minimum wage Advanced point: Pays at least the minimum wage plus costs
2. Fair conditions	Basic point: Mitigates job- or task-specific risks Advanced point: Actively improves working conditions

Fairwork Principle	Threshold
3. Fair contracts	Basic point: Provides clear and transparent terms and conditions Advanced point: Does not impose unfair contract terms
4. Fair management	Basic point: Provides due process for decisions affecting workers Advanced point: Prevents discrimination and promotes equity
5. Fair representation	Basic point: Includes freedom of association and worker voice mechanisms Advanced point: Recognises collective body that can undertake collective representation and bargaining

3. The group assignment in the context of a Digital Economy Masters course

The Digital Economy course forms part of a coursework or taught Masters in ICT Management at a prominent South African university. The MIT degree aims to equip students with “the knowledge and skills to manage and lead information and information technology-related activities in an organisation in strategic, operational and project environments” (Informatics, 2021). It is targeted at people in middle management, in preparation for senior management. Half of the degree credits are coursework and the other half is a mini-dissertation. The Digital Economy course aims to provide students with the tools, skills and an understanding of the technology, business concepts and issues surrounding the emergence of the digital as well as platform economy. Module outcomes include assisting students to gain an understanding of the opportunities and implications of the platform economy, not only for South African business, but also for developing countries. A focus on developing country implications is not often addressed in ICT management degrees, however it aligns with the philosophy of the hosting Informatics Department, namely to promote Informatics as a multi-disciplinary subject,

where information, Information Systems, and the integration thereof into the organization, are studied for the benefit of the entire system (individual, organization and community) (Informatics, 2021). The Digital Economy course (MIT845) is presented in block lectures with assessment in the form of individual essays and group assignments. In 2019, a Fairwork guest lecture was presented on MIT845, by a South African based Fairwork project leader. Students responded with enthusiasm to the Fairwork initiative. In 2020, it was decided to introduce a Fairwork based group assignment on MIT845. The assignment was meant to give students real life exposure to the platform economy as well as its socio-economic implications, specifically related to the working conditions of South African platform workers. Apart from gaining domain knowledge, students were given the opportunity to conduct field work in the form of interviews with South African platform workers. This field work opportunity would also give students practical exposure to conducting empirical research, in preparation for their mini-dissertations. The assignment is presented below.

Preparation for the assignment entailed the following:

- Creating awareness of the labour issues facing gig workers and in particular digital platform workers, by exposing students to the Fairwork project through a guest lecture; and
- An individual assignment where students had to do desktop research on the notion of digital platforms as well as their socio-economic impact, in particular in developing country contexts.

The reason for a prior individual assignment was to ensure that each student entered the group assignment with sufficient background knowledge to make a meaningful contribution to the group assignment.

The group assignment involved the following:

- Each group had to select a different South African digital platform (preferably location-based instead of cloud-based) that operated within the geographic vicinity of the students;
- A critical literature review on the socio-economic impact of the selected platform type (e.g. e-hailing), and the platform itself to the South African economy from a micro- and macro perspective;
- Interviews with at least 5 workers of the selected platform, in order to calculate a Fairwork rating for the platform;
- A qualitative assessment of how workers subjectively experienced their work, including positive as well as negative aspects;
- Presentation of findings by means of a report as well as a live presentation to the rest of the class.

The individual and group assignments were released simultaneously. Students were given a month to complete the individual assignment and two months to complete the group assignment.

4. Assignment findings

The class of 35 students (all of them working full-time as IT professionals and pursuing their Masters part-time) self-selected into seven groups of five students each. The

platforms they selected to research were well-known e-hailing, delivery and service-rendering platforms that operated in Gauteng, South Africa. For the empirical part of the assignment, students had to find evidence (from documents and/or interviews) to score the platform on the five Fairwork principles that were discussed in Section 2.

The students scored the seven platforms as indicated in Table 2. While the quality of the assignments differed and the Fairwork methodology wasn't always followed rigorously, the groups all received at least a pass mark and provided sufficient evidence to substantiate their rating scores.

Table 2: Platform scores by students

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

As can be seen from Table 2, a large discrepancy was found in how platforms treated their workers, with four of the seven platforms receiving scores of 3 or less out of 10. Only Platform1 – incidentally the only cloud-based i.e. not location-based platform – was found to have very good working conditions for its workers. Students had to substantiate their findings with quotes from interview transcripts. In the discussion

below, it is indicated how the students motivated the ratings scores for the different platform types:

4.1 Fair Pay

The two service rendering platforms (Platform 1 and Platform5) both received a full score of 2 points for Fair Pay, meaning they went beyond paying the minimum wage to pay at least a minimum wage plus costs.

“The platform workflow has built-in controls that prevent a job from being posted under the living wage in South Africa. This built-in control satisfies both points 1 and 2 for the Fair Pay category” (Group 1 report, p.14)

“With [Platform5], the workers are being paid a minimum of R120 per 3 hours for services rendered (as a service purchase must book [a worker] for at least 3 hours, that is the lowest that they are allowed to book...for), thus equating to R40 per hour....they are not only paying their workers above the minimum wage, but they also have a policy in place and “rule” embedded on the platforms app ...[Platform5] does pay almost double of the national minimum wage in South Africa and are working an average of 6 to 8 hours per day three times a week”. (Group 5 report, p.12)

Three delivery platforms were included in the study: Platform2, Platform3 and Platform6. The workers of Platform2 and Platform3 reported more or less similar wages and working conditions. While their gross earnings were above the National Minimum Wage (R20.76 per hour in 2020), they ended up working very long hours per day and at least 6 days a week, which typically prevented them from supplementing their income

from other sources. Further, they had relatively high work-related expenses. Therefore both Platform2 and Platform3 scored a 1 for Fair Pay:

“Wages ... averages to R2000.00 a week and the average hours per day is 10 hours... they work six days a week. There are no subsidies for [work related expenses] and they do not contribute towards the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF).” (Group 2 report, p. 12)

“The gross pay is above the minimum wage, but the [workers] may incur more costs hence the net pay is at times less than the minimum wage.” (Group 3 report, p. 17)

However, the workers of Platform6 earned a minimum wage after taking into account their costs, and thus Platform6 scored 2 points for Fair Pay:

“After including the costs associated with using platform the daily average wage dropped to [R]230 [per day], this is still higher than the minimum wage of [R]166 [per day]. The general feedback from all interviewees was that they are better off financially than they were at their previous employment.” (Group 6 report, p 26)

There were two e-hailing platforms: Platform4 and Platform7. For both e-hailing platforms, the workers had significant work-related expenses not covered by the platform. This meant that they ended up working very long hours to make sufficient money, as was the case with the delivery platform workers. For this reason, both Platform4 and Platform7 also scored a 1 for Fair Pay:

“Workers must cover their own running costs, such as petrol, insurance, car servicing etc. ... The pay is above the current minimum wage, however that doesn't mean it is a decent pay considering the running costs.” (Group 4 report, p. 9)

“The driver usually works additional hours to make-up for additional expenses” (Group 7 report, p.28)

4.2 Fair Conditions

For Platform1, Group 1 found a documented policy to manage task-specific risks, but no evidence that the platform was actively improving working conditions beyond this, and hence Platform1 scored a 1. The same was found for Platform5:

“The platform does take some steps to protect employee’s health and safety. But the employees do their job or go to work at their own risk.” (Group 5 report, p. 12)

For the delivery platforms, working conditions were mitigated for Platform2 and Platform3 but with clear remaining areas of concern for the workers, therefore these platforms received a 1 for Fair Conditions. Platform6 fared worse in this regard and scored a 0.

“[Platform2] ... provides safety awareness training and SMS reminders to reduce risk of contracting Covid-19..... [Platform2] is not empathetic to independent contractors in the event of sickness or road accidents. There is a ‘no-work-no-pay’ policy even though the worker might get sick or get injured whilst working.” (Group 2 report, p.10)

“[Platform3] ... drivers have ... been supplied with high visibility jackets and equipment such as masks. Though all of these protocols are in place there is not enough of a case in terms of ensuring that the drivers are safe when they have to drive at night or in areas which may be considered as high risk. The drivers did state that their biggest concern was driving at night and delivering in areas where they view as high risk, with a concern that they may be robbed or not paid for orders.” (Group 3 report, p.9)

As for the e-hailing platforms, it was also found that while some measures were in place to protect workers, there were significant remaining areas of concern. For this reason, both e-hailing platforms scored a 1.

“6 of the 7 respondents reported to have been robbed, 2 reported on being hijacked with the others giving reports of clashes with meter taxis and taxi associations. drivers worked long hours with little rest, this leaves room for fatigue which could result in accidents.” (Group 7 report, p.12)

4.3 Fair Contracts

To receive the first point for Fair Contracts, a platform is required to have a well communicated Terms and Conditions. A second point could be rewarded if the contract genuinely reflects the nature of the employment relationship. Group 1 concluded that the Terms and Conditions of Platform1 met both of these criteria. For the other service rendering platform, Platform5, evidence could only be obtained to support awarding the first point.

“Terms and Conditions is published in clear comprehensible language. In addition, the terms and conditions are published in non-legal terms to make it more comprehensible to the reader.... The fact that each [worker] using [Platform1] is self-employed and that the platform just acts to introduce the buyer and the seller is clearly articulated.” (Group 1 report, p. 19)

“...contract is agreed upon telephonically and the [workers] have access to the terms on conditions ... It is important to note however that some [workers] were not sure how to

access the terms and conditions and some did not understand the contract.” (Group 5 report, p.14)

For the three delivery platforms, there was no consistency in how worker contracts were managed, with Platform2 receiving a full score for Fair Contracts and Platform3 and Platform6 each receiving no points.

“The terms and conditions are available and accessible by independent contractors on the [Platform2] application or online.... Workers are clearly defined as independent contractors and this is articulated in the terms and conditions...” (Group 2 report, p.10)

“[Platform3] did not get any points for contracts as none of the drivers had a contract available” (Group 3 report, p.10)

“The Contract being inaccessible to workers after signing them at the offices indicates that workers may not fully understand what their work requirements entail and have no option to revisit their contract and its conditions.” (Group 6 report, p.27)

For the E-hailing platforms there was also no consistency in how their worker contracts were managed, with Platform4 scoring a 1 and Platform7 scoring 0.

“6 of the 7 respondents were not in possession of an employment contract. All the respondents confirmed not having access or a view of the terms and conditions they signed.” (Group 7 report, p.12)

4.4 Fair Management

Fair Management requires the platform to have communication channels for workers to communicate with platform staff and a process to fairly handle terminations or

deactivations. For a second point, there needs to be evidence of the platform preventing discrimination and promoting equity.

In the case of the service rendering Platform1 and Platform5, there was evidence for both platforms to be awarded 2 points.

“Platform1 provides [workers] with multiple channels to communicate with platform staff. These include Telephone, WhatsApp and Skype... these channels were tested by the team ... and every time one of the [staff] answered the call or responded to the email / WhatsApp.” (Group 1 report, p.20) *“...[worker] Terms and Conditions clearly states the Termination of a Purchase Order... The link to the grievance process is as follows: This was tested by the team”* (Group 1 report, p. 21)

“A WhatsApp line exists in which [workers] can use to voice any questions and concerns...[Platform5] also allows any and everyone to register as a [worker] regardless of their age, race, gender etc the [workers] have been made aware that if they are discriminated against by the clients/service purchaser they may report such behavior” (Group 5 report, p.15)

The three delivery platforms did not fare as well on Fair Management. Platform2 scored a 1, while Platform3 and Platform6 each received no points.

“The drivers could not provide clear evidence that there was a process in place to appeal any disciplinary actions that may arise... The drivers did not know of any policies that deal with discrimination by themselves or their clients.” (Group 3 report, p. 11)

“No evidence of clearly documented policies and procedures that can be followed if a decision is made that negatively affects the worker.... All workers [interviewed] are

unaware of policies or efforts by the company to prevent discrimination against them, with some workers feeling that the company always sides with the client in the event of an issue/disagreement with regards to ... delivery.” (Group 6 report, p.28)

Similarly, neither of the two e-hailing platforms received any points for Fair Management, with workers giving similar feedback as for the delivery platforms.

“Drivers feel that there is a tendency by the platform to rule in favor of the customer and they are subjected to a certain level of abuse from the customers out of fear of being scored low... 4 of the 7 respondents reported on there being no measures to help minority or disadvantaged groups.” (Group 7 report, p.13).

4.5 Fair representation

The principle of Fair Representation considers whether documented processes or mechanisms are in place through which workers’ voices can be heard. The first point is awarded for evidence of freedom of association and the second point, for recognition of collective representation and bargaining.

As was the case with the previous principles, the service rendering platforms fared relatively well with respect to Fair Representation. Platform1 scored 2 points and Platform5 scored 1 point.

“... there are various channels available for [workers] to voice their opinions. These channels were tested by the team and each were met by a platform employee... [Platform1] has a publication on the platform that they will recognise and negotiate with a collective body of workers should one be formed.” (Group 1 report, p.26)

“The [Platform5 workers] do occasionally meet, but often they will chat on WhatsApp on the groups or individually regarding client treatment transport and routes. So anyway, they want to approach the platform collectively will be done so through WhatsApp... None of the [workers] interviewed for this report were aware of any collective body or union that [Platform5] recognises to [bargain] and negotiate rates for them.” (Group 5 report, p.15)

In the case of the delivery platforms, two of them (Platform2 and Platform3) scored 1 point, meaning that workers had channels to communicate with each other. None of the three delivery platforms had a mechanism for collective representation.

“The workers felt they were able to speak to each other and discuss issues they may be facing on the WhatsApp groups that they are part of and can speak to the Driver manager around the issues... there was no union or bargaining body that had been organised by the workers on their behalf.” (Group 3 report, p.12)

“None of the 6 interviewees were aware of any process to voice their concerns and ideas... All 6 of the interviewees went on record to state there are no representative bodies/trade unions that they are aware of that they could join.” (Group 6 report, p.28)

Of the two e-hailing platforms, neither scored any points for Fair Representation.

“There is no true evidence of freedom of association. Workers felt isolated and misrepresented. Feedback received from the workers was that there was no union or collective representation of the workers.” (Group 7 report, p.13)

5. Discussion of assignment findings

In the previous section, the assignment results were discussed per fair work principle and per platform type. Some commonalities were observed, although given the limited number of platforms included and the limited number of workers interviewed, care should be applied in drawing general conclusions from the patterns.

In terms of Fair Pay, the seven platforms all paid a minimum wage. However, the workers of some platform types (for example e-hailing) had significant work-related expenses that were not covered by the platforms, and these workers ended up working a large amount of hours per week in order to survive financially. The workers on the delivery platforms also ended up working very long hours.

None of the seven platforms studied received a full score for Fair Conditions. In all cases it was found that some tasks-specific risks were addressed while there were other risks that were of great concern to the workers that were not addressed.

In terms of Fair Contracts, worker contracts were managed inconsistently among the platforms. With only two of the seven platforms, it was found that workers had access to their contracts, the terms and conditions were accessible to them and the nature of their employment relationship was clearly spelled out. With three of the platforms, the contracts were not accessible to workers after they were signed and thus the workers could not refer back to the terms and conditions or the nature of their relationship. In the case of both the delivery and e-hailing platforms, there was a clear sentiment among the workers interviewed that management tended to side with customers in the case of an issue or disagreement.

In terms of Fair Management, both service rendering platform received a full score of two points. The other platforms fared worse: four of the other five platforms received no points at all for Fair Management, meaning workers believed there were no processes in place for fair termination and neither was anything done to prevent discrimination and promote equity.

Regarding the principle of Fair Representation, only four of the seven platforms allowed for freedom of association, and only one platform (Platform1) allowed for collective bargaining by its workers (the advanced point for Fairwork Principle 5).

5.1 Comparison of student assignment findings with Fairwork SA reports

To gauge the reliability of the findings of the student assignments, their findings will now be compared to the official ratings that the same platforms received from the Fairwork SA project. It needs to be noted that there was a time delay of about 8 months between the Fairwork 2020 study, which was performed early in 2020, and the student assignment, which was done in the second semester of 2020. Students were aware of the official Fairwork ratings, yet they had to provide their own evidence for the ratings in their assignments. It is therefore possible that they could arrive at different scores for some of the principles. In Table 3 below, the student findings are displayed with the official Fairwork scores for each platform and principle in brackets.

Table 3: Comparison between student assignment findings and Fairwork 2020 findings

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)	2 (2)	1 (1)	1 (1)	1 (0)	2*	1 (1)
2. Fair conditions	1 (1)	1 (2)	1 (1)	1 (2)	0 (0)	0	1 (0)
3. Fair contracts	2 (2)	1 (1)	2 (1)	1 (1)	0 (0)	0	0 (0)
4. Fair management	2 (1)	2 (2)	1 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0	0 (0)
5. Fair representation	2 (2)	1 (1)	1 (0)	0 (0)	1 (0)	0	0 (0)
Total score /10	9 (8)	7 (8)	6 (3)	3 (4)	2 (0)	2	2 (1)
Assignment mark (%)	83	91	67	71	78	76	90

*Platform6 was not assessed by the Fairwork team.

Interestingly, the student scores are within one point of the official ratings, for four of the six platforms that were scored by both students and the Fairwork project. For Platform3, there is a difference of 2 points and for Platform2, a difference of 3 points. When considering the student assignment marks, it can be seen that the platform with the biggest discrepancy is generally with the student groups that received the lowest marks. However, it cannot be said that the discrepancies overall are a result of the students not doing a proper job, as there are many other factors that came into play. These include differences in time of data collection, differences in geographical location as well as the fact that different workers were interviewed.

5.2 Relative performance of the different types of platforms

When considering the total ratings received per platform type, the two service rendering platforms performed significantly better as scored by the students as well as the

Fairwork team. This is in line with the overall ratings picture that emerges in both the 2020 and 2021 Fairwork South Africa reports. In the Fairwork South Africa 2020 report (Fairwork, 2020b), 11 platforms were rated of which the four top performing platforms (GetTOD, SweepSouth, NoSweat and M4Jam) were all service rendering platforms. The same was found in the Fairwork South Africa 2021 report (Fairwork, 2021). As for the delivery and e-hailing platforms included in the study, the overall picture that emerges from the student interviews is that the working conditions of their workers leave much to be desired. Even though there is less consistency between the student ratings and the Fairwork ratings for the e-hailing and delivery platforms, the findings are not contradictory.

6. Feedback from students on the assignment

After completion of the assignment, students were asked to complete a survey where they had to give individual feedback on the assignment. The survey formed part of a research project for which ethical clearance was obtained from the researcher's university. The survey was completed by 29 of the 35 students.

Responses to the question on *the most valuable aspect of this assignment* included the following:

"The voice of the workers was valuable the most as I got to understand the other side as I view as a great platform, it was shocking to hear how the efficiency and great business model created comes at the back of unfair labor practices."

“Being on the ground and engaging with the interviewees and literally putting yourself in the shoes of these people, and not just having a birds eye or a generalist attitude to the problems they face. This for me was a powerful exercise”

“I gained a lot of insight and got to find out that there is a lot that people are going through in various workplaces but because most people we don’t take an initiative to research we think it’s all hunky dory. I thought ... partners had it all great but those guys are just working because they do not have any other source of income. No fair practice.”

“The research highlighted the workers perspective, I always think as an ICT practitioner and a consumer”

As can be seen from the responses to this question, students valued the fact that they gained insight on the ‘other side’ or workers’ view of the platforms, whereas previously they were only given the business perspective.

On the question on *the least valuable aspect of the assignment*, 21 respondents stated that they had nothing to report. Among the eight students that reported a least valuable aspect there was no common theme. One referred to the challenge of group work in general, another to lockdown conditions while one student stated:

“Once we had interviewed these people, there is no clear next steps for the drivers. we leave them in the same situation, there is no continuation in helping resolving some of the issues they face or for the interviewees knowing that we would remain in contact with them.”

The responses to this question indicated that overall, the assignment was not being experienced as ‘not valuable’. The quote above indicated that the assignment spoke to

the social conscience of one of the students who felt powerless that s/he could not help the workers further.

Under *general comments on the assignment*, responses included the following:

“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.”

“This assignment opened a new aspect of technology in South Africa and made me aware how far we are as country to improve our technologies and make e-hailing jobs fair to everyone.”

While not all students provided general comments, the biggest theme that emerged was that the assignment was an eye-opener and offered them valuable new insights into some of the socio-economic impacts of technology-driven changes.

7. Conclusion

Apart from achieving one of the Digital Economy course objectives, namely to teach students about the Digital Economy, this assignment went further and also gave students hands-on research experience where they had to collect and analyse empirical data aligned to the existing research protocol of the Fairwork project. Furthermore, it is believed that the student assignment helped to broaden the minds of the ICT Management students, thereby delivering graduates that are better informed of broader societal issues and with the ability to engage in those issues as informed citizens if not thought leaders in their business and social spheres.

Based on the experience with incorporating this assignment as part of a Digital Economy course, it is recommended that ICT Management programmes extend their syllabi to be more comprehensive in terms of covering not only technology and its management from a business perspective, but also explicitly focus on the socio-economic implications of new technologies.

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