Exploring key challenges encountered by hospitality management students participating in a work-integrated learning (WIL) programme in South Africa

Nombeko Felicity Dwesini
Senior Coordinator_ Work-Integrated Learning (WIL)
Community Engagement & Internationalization
Walter Sisulu University
Tel: 043-7094076/30
E-mail: ndwesini@wsu.ac.za

Abstract

This research explores the key challenges encountered by hospitality management students in a comprehensive university (CU) in South Africa while engaged in work-integrated learning (WIL) in hotels throughout the country. WIL refers to a range of activities or programmes that integrate academic learning with its application in the workplace. It is widely considered instrumental in assisting students to acquire employability skills to function effectively in the workplace. While WIL provides students with the opportunity to acquire and improve their disciplinary skills and knowledge it should also be noted that the transition from higher education institutions to the workplace for students is very complex. There are challenges that students encounter while participating in WIL programmes. These challenges shape the quality of WIL that students experience and therefore the knowledge, skills and abilities they acquire from the workplace. Therefore, it is important for these challenges to be understood and addressed. While much of the literature on WIL outlines the WIL benefits for the primary stakeholders (i.e. students, academic institutions and host employers), few tackle the challenges experienced during implementation. This study employs an individual case study methodology. Three focus group discussions with 10 participants in a group and individual in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 participants (5 participants from each campus of the CU). Findings of this study revealed various challenges that students experience in the workplace. From the results of this research recommendations are proposed for addressing the key challenges identified in the study so as to enhance the experience for all parties concerned.

Keywords: work-integrated learning, workplace, employability skills, comprehensive university.

Introduction

This paper reports on a case study and relates hospitality students' perspectives of the key challenges they experienced while participating in a work-integrated learning (WIL) programme in the hotel industry in South Africa. WIL is an acknowledged strategic direction in most higher education institutions in South Africa and abroad. WIL refers to a range of activities or programmes that integrate academic learning with its application in the workplace. It is widely considered instrumental in assisting students to acquire employability skills to function effectively in the workplace. WIL adds a dimension to a student's education that cannot be acquired in the traditional lecture room environment. In South Africa most of the academic programmes offered by comprehensive universities (CUs) and universities of technology (UoTs) incorporate a compulsory component of WIL. This is an attempt to afford graduates from these universities the opportunity of being employable at the point of graduation. During WIL students are afforded an

opportunity to integrate the theory they learn in the classroom to the realities of the workplace. It is believed that when a WIL programme is planned in conjunction with industry representatives and professional bodies it meets the needs of both students and industry providing the students with the skills they need and at the same time meeting the requirements of the academic institution from which the students are coming. WIL is essentially a three-way partnership among the students, university and the employer. There is a considerable body of evidence suggesting that WIL benefits all key stakeholders, that is, students, universities and employers (Abeysekera, 2006; Weisz, and Smith, 2005; Williamson and Mannion, 2005, Wessels, 2007, Martin and Hughes, 2009).

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The national diploma in hospitality management at the university under study is a three-year academic programme. This programme is offered in three campuses of the particular university. The hospitality programme integrates the theory that students learn in the lecture halls and real-life experience through WIL placements. The hospitality management students spend 12 months of their 36 months academic programme in the workplace, the first six (6) months during the second semester of their second year of study and another six (6) months in the second semester of their third and final year of study. This is an effort to provide students with as much hospitality industry exposure as possible before graduation. It is believed at the end of their study these students are work-ready and employable.

This article is based on a case study and identifies and examine key challenges that are currently confronting hospitality management students from one comprehensive university in South Africa while participating in a WIL programme in different hotels throughout South Africa The objective of this study is to better understand the challenges faced by hospitality students that are engaged in WIL programs so that they can be addressed and the quality of student learning during WIL placement could be improved. In this way, the higher education institution will produce quality hospitality graduates that are better prepared for the workplace. Two research questions guided this study and these are: What are the key challenges that hospitality management students encounter while participating in a WIL programme? How can the challenges identified be addressed?

In this article research conducted in 2015-2016 is reported. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: it commences with a review of the literature. Following this, the methodology approach adopted to collect the data is discussed and justified. This article then discusses the challenges encountered by hospitality students during WIL placement. The paper then recommends some strategies to overcome the challenges identified. Finally, limitations of the research are presented and future research is suggested.

Literature review

The literature review presented here comprises of two sections. Firstly, the benefits of WIL to the primary stakeholders (i.e. students, university and employers) are reviewed. Secondly the expectations of WIL students and those of employers are highlighted.

The benefits of WIL

The primary purpose of WIL is to give trainees (i.e. students on WIL) the opportunity to apply the theoretical knowledge they acquired in the lecture room in an authentic workplace environment and therefore develop employability skills and knowledge while getting a deeper understanding of their discipline and the professional environment of their discipline. A thorough literature search reveals that WIL benefits to students, academic institutions and the employers are numerous (Abeysekera, 2006; Weisz, and Smith, 2005; Williamson and Mannion, 2005, Wessels, 2007, Martin and Hughes, 2009). Some of these are discussed below.

Students' benefits

WIL adds a dimension to students' learning which students cannot gain in the traditional lecture room setting (Walo, 2001; Weisz & Smith, 2005). Students gain practical experience; integrate the theoretical knowledge gained from the university in a "real world of work environment"; experience the realities of the workplace; and develop network of professional contacts within one's field. Martin and Hughes (2009) argue that students experience a professional organisation and its culture. They further assert that WIL students add value to an organisation by delivering project objectives. Students also get the chance to refine and develop new professional skills. They also earn entry-level positions in the workplace as many students get absorbed by host employers depending on the students' performance during WIL and on whether there is an available position at the time. Williamson and Mannion (2005) note the following WIL benefits to students:

- Awareness of industry or business
- Gaining and applying problem solving skills using the knowledge acquired in the classroom
- Experience of team work
- Smooth transition from university to the workplace after graduation
- Experience on how to handle interview and gain employability skills
- A clear picture of their future employability possibilities

It is believed graduates who undertook WIL as part of their academic programmes easily get employment upon graduation as employers prefer to employ graduates who have some experience.

Academic institution benefits

Benefits for the academic institutions offering WIL programme include increased networking and close links with professional practitioners and industry (Walo, 2001; Williamson and Mannion, 2005; Martin & Hughes, 2009) which ensures up-to-date curriculum; enhancement of the image of the university, faculty or department; and a better qualified graduate. Weisz and Chapman (2004) as cited in Cullen (2005) include student recruitment and enrolment, curriculum development, internationalization, staff development and financial benefits as benefits derived by academic institutions from WIL programs.

Employer benefits

One of the WIL benefits for the employer is knowledge transfer. It is believed that WIL students bring fresh ideas to the workplace from university.   The literature reveals that employers also benefit from WIL programs in the following ways: provision of low-cost temporary, motivated employees; and building a pipeline of skilled employees. The WIL students provide backup for current staff. During WIL both employers and students are provided with an opportunity to determine whether there is a suitable 'match' for permanent employment in a non-threatening environment. The WIL partnership is an opportunity for the employer to establish close links with higher education institutions and therefore influence the university's curriculum to suit employers' specific needs.

Expectations of WIL

Challenges of WIL cannot be studied in isolation. They have to be coupled with the expectations of the primary WIL stakeholders. WIL placements have multiple stakeholders as indicated above, each with their own set of expectations and requirements, both explicit and implicit. When employees join organisations they do so with certain expectations about the organisation – what they can offer the organization and what they want to receive from it. The same applies in the case of WIL. Literature review reveals that students' expectations about the workplace are often too high and not realistic. Sibanyoni, Kleynhans and Vibetti (2015) believe this is due to limited exposure to the reality of the industry prior to starting their studies which if not corrected will negatively affect the graduates' experiences. Furthermore, studying stakeholders' expectations of contributions to be made and benefits to be derived from WIL is important as employers' or supervisors' expectations influence how these stakeholders behave during WIL.

Employers or supervisors' expectations can affect student learning during WIL placement. It is also the case that students' expectations influence their attitude towards the organisation and its employees and therefore their behavior. It is argued that expectations are reflected in both the attitudes and consequent behavior of employees. When WIL students join the workplace to undertake training they represent themselves, the universities they come from and their academic departments. They are therefore expected to behave in a professional manner at all times while on the WIL placement. Students are expected to show respect and understanding towards the goals, rules and philosophies of the employer and the university.

In a study by Levin, Bok and Evans (2010) when students were asked about their expectations of Industry Based Learning (IBL) their responses were strongly aligned with the many benefits of IBL and WIL for students that are identified in the literature on WIL. In this study students further mentioned professional experience, acquiring professional skills and being afforded an opportunity to explore career options. Participants also highlighted taking a break away from school and having a chance to mature as expectations from WIL. In the same study employers' expectations were primarily to develop and potentially recruit new employees. Employers further expressed a social obligation to provide employment opportunities for students and future graduates. Billett and Choy (2013) assert that learners in the workplace need to be aware of what is expected of them. They further say that before engaging in the workplace learners need to possess capacities to undertake activities reasonably expected of them in the workplace.

According to Dickerson and Kline (2008) successful work experience enhances the development of positive and realistic expectation which result to successful industry retention. Furthermore, these early experiences influence the decision whether to continue working in the hospitality industry or not. Billett and Choy (2013) argue that some students will encounter unpleasant and unhelpful experiences during WIL. They further opine such students need to be prepared for

such experiences for their own wellbeing and sense of self and they must be able to manage these situations.

Research methodology

This is a small scale exploratory research which adopted a case study methodology to reveal the key challenges experienced by hospitality management students engaged in a WIL programme. The qualitative approach was deemed the most suitable method to be used in this research as the study is aimed to highlight in a descriptive manner the challenges faced by students while on a WIL program. As is characteristic of the case study approach, data were gathered from multiple sources; focus group discussions and in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Participants for the study were chosen using the purposive sampling method. The sample was drawn from the 2015 and 2016 cohorts of hospitality management students who had already completed their first six months WIL programme. The population for this study comprised all the CU hospitality management students who have completed their first WIL component.

The purpose of the research was communicated to all participants and anonymity of their feedback was confirmed. Participants were also informed about their freedom to choose to participate or not participate in the study. Specifically, participants were asked to identify the key challenges they encountered while engaged in a WIL programme and to also give suggestions on how the identified challenges could be addressed. Ethical clearance was obtained from the CU first as a matter of required action. Three focus group discussions were held with hospitality students from three different campuses of the CU, each group consisting of 10 participants. The focus group discussions were followed by semi-structured in-depth interviews that were held with 5 students from each of the three campuses making a total of 15 participants to supplement the data obtained from focus group interviews.

The responses to the questions asked during focus group discussions highlighted key areas of interest that were utilized in constructing the interview schedule for the in-depth face-to-face interviews. A total of 30 participants took part in the focus group discussions and a total of 15 participants took part in in-depth interviews. These multiple sources brought a rich understanding of the challenges encountered by hospitality students participating in a WIL programme. Data was analysed using content analysis.

Findings of the study

Much of the literature on WIL outlines the WIL benefits for the primary stakeholders (i.e. students, academic institutions and host employers), but few tackle the challenges experienced during implementation. This section presents the findings of the study. The focus groups and in-depth interviews yielded the following detailed information about the challenges hospitality students encounter while participating in WIL placements:

No remuneration

The findings of this study show that there are still employers who do not pay any remuneration to the WIL students. Students reported that this is very strenuous to them as they need to pay for transport to and from work, accommodation and meals as most of them are placed far from home. Some students reported that they did not complete their training due to lack of money to finance transport and accommodation as they were not paid by their employers. One student made the following comment:

> It is difficult to accept a placement that is far from home if there is no stipend as you will need to pay for transport and accommodation. It is also painful when the month-end comes and you watch the people you work with getting paid and you receive nothing

No induction at the start of the WIL program

Host employers are expected to provide WIL learners with induction on the first day at the workplace to familiarize them with the new environment. Induction makes WIL students aware of what is expected of them in the workplace. However, some of the participants indicated that they did not receive induction when they joined the workplace.

Insufficient support from the academic institution

Students greatly appreciate the fact that the university prepares them before they start their WIL programme. They note that by the time they get to the workplace they know what to expect and what is expected of them by the supervisors. However, they complained that the time that is most challenging for them are the first few weeks in the workplace when they must settle in and at the same time try to find accommodation for themselves. These are students who are placed far from their homes. They mentioned that very few hotels provide accommodation for students on WIL. Students wish that their university can assist them in securing accommodation when undertaking WIL far from home. This challenge was coupled with the problem of "no remuneration". Another comment made with regard to these two problems is:

> If there is no remuneration, there can be no accommodation unless you are lucky enough to have a relative closer to where you are placed for WIL and very few of us were that fortunate.

One student whose home is in East London mentioned that he stayed in the shack while doing his WIL program in Durban. He said:

> I stayed "*ematyotyomben*i" (meaning "in shacks") and I could not complain because I wanted to   finish my experiential learning and graduate.

Not enough visits

Students on WIL are visited once in a semester by the academic supervisors as a mechanism to monitor the WIL program. The visits are also meant to strengthen the relations between the CU and the employers. During the visit the academic supervisor is expected to interview the workplace supervisor and the learner with regards to the performance of the learner in the workplace and establish if there are any concerns from both sides. These students complain that being visited once is not enough. They wished there could be more visits and telephone calls from the academic department to both students and supervisors to check if things are going in the right direction. Another student suggested:

> I think the university should not wait until an academic is able to visit us. There should be constant communication from the university not only with supervisors but with us, students, to double-check if we are settling well in the workplace.

The graveyard shift

Most of the participants mentioned the graveyard shift as one of the biggest challenges they encountered during their WIL training. The graveyard shift is the shift which starts from 14h00 in the afternoon until 23h00 in the evening. One respondent made the following comment:

> The graveyard shift is the most dangerous thing we experienced during WIL because you finish off at 23h00 when it is difficult to get public transport and the hotel does not provide transport.

Attitude of some supervisors and co-workers

Some participants reported that when they contribute to what is happening in the workplace their ideas were not taken seriously. An example that was cited during the focus group discussion was that the cleaners would come and fetch linen in housekeeping without the linen being counted. One participant lamented:

> At university, we are taught that there has to be someone responsible for counting and issuing linen in housekeeping. When we try and correct how they do things, they do not take our advice. This aspect surprises us because at university we are told we are not coming to the workplace only to learn but we are also expected to bring new ideas to the workplace.

participants also reported that some of their co-workers had a negative attitude towards them thinking that they were there to take their positions. One student further noted the following:

> The problem is that co-workers treat you as someone who knows nothing whereas we have come to the workplace for exposure and practical experience and not that we do not know anything.

Working overtime

Students reported that sometimes they would work overtime without extra remuneration. One student pointed out she worked nine (9) days in a row without any time off. The student further explained this did not happen with the permanent staff; it only applied to trainees. Yet another participant explained that she was supposed to finish on the 31st December in terms of her contract but she was ordered to work until the 4th of January the following year. This student commented:

> The problem is that when you complain they say you are not respectful. Sometimes they assign you irrelevant work and you feel you are compelled to do it because you want to complete your studies.

Another student added:

> Another problem is that you are just told to do something without any explanation. If for instance it would be communicated to you why you must work nine days in a row it would be better.

Feedback provided at end of WIL program

A number of participants revealed that there have never been feedback sessions during the WIL programme until the end of the programme. They further explained the logbooks were only completed a few days before they left the workplace and nothing was explained to them.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study was undertaken with the aim to investigate the key challenges experienced by hospitality management students participating in a WIL programme in the hospitality industry in

South Africa. This section will discuss and interpret data on how participants shared their insights with suggestions on what could be done to improve the overall experience of WIL. The findings provide data that is relevant to WIL stakeholders, that is, students, higher education institutions and host employers. The study reveals that there are still hotels that do not remunerate WIL students. This brings hardship to the poor students as they have to pay for accommodation, transport and meals. This problem can be addressed by both the CU and the employer approaching the relevant SETA and source funding which could be used to provide stipend to WIL learners.

The question of the induction can also be addressed by the CU emphasizing its importance to the host employer at the time of the placement. The purpose of induction is to familiarize the WIL learners with the new workplace environment. It is also meant to inform the learners about what is expected of them during the WIL programme. WIL learners cannot be expected to perform well if they are thrown in the deep end.

Students also complained that only one visit in a semester is simply not enough, calling for more interaction between the university and the hotel industry to be in place. They suggested that the university should constantly communicate not only with workplace supervisors but also with students to hear if all is well so that if there is a problem it can be nipped in the bud before it blows out of proportion. It is possible for the university to pay more than one visit in a semester to those host employers that are closer to the university but it is difficult with far away employers because of lack of funding. WIL is not funded by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) in South Africa. The CU under study sets aside a budget for WIL but this budget is not enough to allow more than one visit per semester. Academic supervisors can in addition to the visit make at least one telephone call per month to the workplace supervisor and to the student as suggested by students in the focus group discussions and the interviews.

Students also wish hotels could provide them with transport when doing what they term "the graveyard shift". The researcher believes this could be negotiated between the university and the various hotels at the time of placement as this shift puts the students' lives at risk. It was reported during the focus group discussions that some hotels deal with this problem by providing space for staff doing "the graveyard shift" to sleep-over in the hotel except for those with own transport.

With regards to the negative attitude from supervisors and co-workers reported by participants in this study, it is advisable that the hotels should educate the staff on the purpose and importance of WIL. The researcher believes this kind of attitude is sometimes caused by ignorance and the fear of the unknown on the part of employees.

Students must also learn to speak on their behalves. The most important thing is the approach and attitude when putting your point across. Also, in the work-preparedness program that students undergo before embarking on a WIL programme it is emphasized that students should always report to the university any form of abuse. Therefore, the case of working for nine days without a break could have been reported to the university.

During the interviews one participant commented that it is not easy to change the situation in the hotel industry. He further noted that the only thing that the university can do is to make students aware of the hotel environment so that they go there prepared. The researcher is of the view that with constant interaction between the university and the hotel industry the challenges can be addressed. The academics can also run workshops to capacitate the hotel staff for instance on leadership skills, supervision skills, communication skills and human resource practices.

It is widely believed that WIL programmes are essentially partnerships among the primary WIL stakeholders; students, academic institutions and host employers as indicated above. Close collaboration between the host employer and the educational institution is therefore very critical for the success of a WIL programme. In summary for the challenges identified in this research to be addressed there needs to be increased communication, commitment and trust between the CU and the host employers. The researcher concurs with Billett and Choy (2013) who suggest close partnerships between universities and workplaces as a solution to workplace problems experienced by learners during WIL placements.

It is further suggested that the WIL programme:

- Clearly stipulates stakeholder expectations prior to the start of the WIL programme
- Prioritises student learning
- Develop a support system to help both learners and supervisors should they need assistance during the WIL programme.

Limitations and further research

Finally, some limitations of this study, however, should be acknowledged. Limitations for this research centre on a case study approach and as a result the findings cannot be generalised. In terms of future research this study may be extended to other comprehensive universities and universities of technology. The challenges encountered by students on WIL programmes may also be studied from the gender and ethnic perspectives. It is also suggested that a study on student expectations of a WIL programme be conducted prior to students starting the program seeing that expectations influence behavior in the workplace. The outcomes of such a study would assist in the preparation of WIL students before they leave the university for the workplace. Lastly searching for funding for the WIL programme should be further explored.

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