Hospitality management student's pre-placement perceptions of Work Integrated Learning (WIL)

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Abstract

WIL is a critical component of the program qualification mix of several vocational based curriculum offering within higher learning. WIL helps to illuminate theories in classrooms and make students more mature and assist industry opportunities for selection of potential employees. Students benefit from WIL as they gain practical experience by applying lecture room learning in a "real world" environment. This involves observing theory in action, integrate the application of theory and the opportunity to receive feedback. This study appraises WIL with specific emphasis on hospitality management students. The aim was to determine the views of final year students on their career choice, state of readiness, and potential challenges associated with WIL. Using a mixed method design, students within an HEI were targeted by means of a semi-structured survey. The study reveals that students were highly motivated about their career choice and were enthusiastic about getting into WIL. However, lack of financial resources mainly linked to transportation, changes in lifestyle and a potential move away from their normal area of residence were notable challenges. The study provides valuable information that can be used to inform learning and teaching practices as well as areas that require industry related assistance by relevant stakeholders concerned.

Key words: Students perceptions, work integrated learning, higher education institutions, South Africa

Introduction

In the available scholarship that focuses on education, the component of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) has been highlighted as a critical area that blends theory versus practice in all vocational programmes. According to Jackson (2014), the purpose of WIL programs are to prepare and equip students for the workplace during or post academic study. The author further postulate WIL as the practice of combining traditional academic study with the student exposure to the world-of-work in their respective chosen profession. In South Africa, where the government has identified the tourism sector as a major driver of economic growth, especially in recent turbulent economic challenges that faces the country post-apartheid (Rogerson, 2009), the development of skills required for the advancement of the sector cannot be overemphasized. The development of skills is strongly acknowledged by the tourism policy on education according to the White Paper on the development and promotion of tourism in South Africa (Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism [DEAT], 1996). The tourism policy advocates for Higher Education Institutions (HEI) to play a meaningful role in developing skilled citizens who can work, develop and manage the tourism sector (DEAT, 1996).

Consequently, tourism and hospitality related qualifications offered at many universities in South Africa offer WIL, which is incorporated and assessed as a module and completed within the three year diploma duration. WIL assists both the university and the student in that, while it prepares the student for the industry in terms of gaining practical experience in preparation for employment or starting a business, the feedback received from industry is crucial as it informs curriculum development and programme delivery. WIL within such a context is seen as a tool used to reducing the gap between industry needs and academia.

While several research has been conducted to validate WIL programs and their importance, scant research exist on the voices of students who are about to enter WIL and the impact thereof. Hence this paper aims to identify the predominant areas which influences student perceptions of entering hospitality related WIL in HEIs in South Africa. This is done by exploring the factors that influence students' choice of a career in hospitality management and their general perceptions in terms of readiness when entering the WIL environment. Furthermore this paper paves a pathway for additional research to be conducted at viewing student's perception of their WIL post exposure within industry.

WIL in context

According to Solnet, Kralj, Kay and DeVeau (2009), WIL is increasingly recognized as the bridge between classroom learning and the practical application of theory in the workplace and therefore becoming a central feature in many academic courses around the globe. Nicolaides (2015) underscores that, a learner entering WIL will be primarily concerned with learning more about his/her chosen industry and will probably view the entire process as one which enhances his/her employability once graduated. Furthermore the educator will see the experience as one which allows the learner to investigate the nature of the industry in a more intimate fashion (Nicolaides, 2015).

Vong and Kwan (2005) supports the notion that WIL helps to illuminate theories in classrooms and make students more mature and assist industry opportunities for selection of potential employees. As Dwesini (2015) observes, students benefit from WIL as they gain practical experience by applying lecture room learning in a "real world" environment. This involves observing theory in action, integrate the application of theory and the opportunity to receive feedback on the ability of that application (Dwesini, 2015). However, Vong and Kwan (2005) asserts that during peak season, trainees and interns may become an extra pair of hands required by host organisations to meet increase in demand for their product or services. Elsewhere in the available literature, Tse (2010) emphasises that internships and WIL are considered important, and research findings indicates that there is a discrepancy between student perceptions and satisfaction with WIL. Tse (2010) found evidence in the United Kingdom, of discrepancies between the perceptions of pre-work experience and the actual experience indicating that the work experience benefits are not fully realized. Solnet *et al.* (2009) note that a significant challenge of hospitality internships is that these programs are designed for academic purposes however they are carried out in non-academic environment. Blomme, Van Rheede and Tromp (2009) argue that students experiences to what they thought the job would be are constructed from either school, part-time jobs and in placements when completing their internships.

Career choice

According to Kim *et al.* (2010), there has been a swift growth in the hospitality industry which has resulted into the generation of employment worldwide. Kumar, Singh, Kumar and Shalini (2014), further report that an estimated 296 million jobs are expected to be created by the year 2019 within the industry. However, Kumar *et al.* (2014) also identify that there exists a gap between the demand and supply of manpower to the hospitality and tourism industry. The reason for this gap, they argue, is due to the negative perception involving the natures surrounding the industry (Kumar *et al.*, 2014). Kniveton (2004) asserts that a person's choice of career are influenced by the conceptualization of their abilities and preferences, and is even further influenced by their gender and place in the family. Workman (2015) contends that students are influenced positively by their parents in their major career decision making processes. According to Kniveton (2004) both school and family can provide information and

guidance, directly or indirectly, to influence a young's persons' choice of career. Furthermore Kniveton (2004) asserts that schools teachers can identify abilities, encourage students to take certain subject options and even partake in work experience or employee visits which assist in career choice. For Chuang and Dellmann- Jenkins (2010), the concept of outcome expectations which is relative to student's career choice, and the expected outcome toward a career option can be physical e.g. working conditions, social e.g. power and self-evaluation e.g. achievement.

In a study conducted in the United States of America, Chaung and Dellmann-Jenkins (2010) reported that majority of students make their own decision regarding career choice and followed by influence by parents, siblings and friends. However Kniveton (2004) point out that research conducted in England indicated that parents have a greater influence on students' decision making on career choice. Studies conducted in Australia contradicts with factors that were most influential being opportunities to travel abroad or a job that will contribute to society. According to Teng (2008), hospitality students display a negative attitude to careers towards entering the hospitality industry particularly with regard to job characteristics and working conditions. Teng (2008) opines that, such students feel disappointed with the real work experiences that they obtain through internships which leads to unfavorable attitude towards the industry.

The above represents a concern for HEIs, especially in the context of South Africa, as students may be discouraged to remain in the hospitality industry after being introduced to WIL. In his study, Nicolaides (2015) strongly cautions that, the secret to economic competiveness for any country lies in the realization that the training and education of the workforce are essential to success. Hence an effective WIL process would be imperative. Teng (2008) conducted a study in Taiwan with particular focus on attitudes of students that had been in WIL and hospitality employment aspirations. Teng found that the majority of students in Taiwan hold unfavorable attitudes towards getting hospitality jobs upon graduation. Within this context, there is need to explore the current perception of students in South Africa before they enter internships or WIL. This current research may provide insights from students and possible challenges that may influence their WIL experience.

Methodology

The study adopted a mixed method approach with the use of semi-structured surveys. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2010), survey research involves acquiring information about one or more groups of people – perhaps about their characteristics, opinions, attitudes, or previous experiences – by asking them questions and tabulating their answers. In this study, the questionnaires were coded in advance which paved way for easy data capturing post administration. All questionnaires were checked for completeness and usability. The target sample were students that were enrolled in Hospitality Management programme and who were eligible to enter the WIL program for the first time. Teng (2008) selected a similar target sample in Taiwan which targeted all senior undergraduates who were enrolled in the same qualification such as hospitality management, and food and beverage programmes. The total target sample for this study consisted of 109 eligible students who were purposively selected. Questionnaires were captured and analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software version 23. The use of descriptive analysis was applied to represent the findings. Qualitative data was analysed into conceptual categories based on emerging themes from the data.

Results and discussion

Demographic variable of respondents

In terms of the demographic composition of the respondents, results indicated that majority of respondents were female (85%) as opposed to male (15%). This finding could represents a clear indication of a gender bias towards female involvement within the hospitality industry in South Africa and in choosing it as a career option. The findings are also consistent with those of Kumar *et al.* (2014) who found that there is an imbalance in terms of the demographic profile of students who opt for hospitality as a career and suggest that previous experience is a motivation for males whereas opportunities to work with people is more a motivational factor for females compared to males (Hjalager, 2003). In terms of racial classification, the majority were blacks including Indians (70%), followed by coloureds (20%) and whites (10%). Their age range was found to be between 19 and 24 years with an average age of 22.5 years.

Career choice

Findings indicate that majority (70%) of the respondents chose hospitality management as their first choice of study. The few respondents (27.5%) said that they chose the program as a second choice of study, while the remaining 2.5% chose it as third choice. The findings provide a good indication of meeting the objective of the study, as most of the respondents were found to have initially selected the hospitality sub-sector as an industry of choice to develop a career. According to Kim *et al.* (2010), hospitality graduates can seek or create employment in lodging/hotel, food/restaurants and meetings/conventions and travel. In order to further understand the background of career choice, an open-ended question was asked to the respondents to elaborate on the factors that contributed to their choice of pursuing a career in hospitality. From the data set, the responses received were conceptualized into the following four major themes (factors):

General interest in the industry

The results suggest that almost all of the respondents indicated having a general interest in the industry. Such a finding is not surprising given the emphasis that has been placed on the significance of the tourism sector as a growth and development sector in post-apartheid South Africa. The well-publicized growth of the sector, dominated by the emergence of hotel chains businesses that blossomed as a result of the 2010 FIFA World Cup hosting (see Rogerson, 2009), may have contributed to the increased interest in choosing a career in the hospitality industry in recent times. Furthermore the findings are consistent when read in line with percentages of those who indicated choosing the hospitality programme as a first option of study.

Passion

Another theme that emerged from the data set could be linked to passion. The responses received indicated a strong sense of passion which is consistent with the theme involving the general interest previously presented above. For example, responses such as *"I am very passionate about the industry", "I have the passion for food", "I love the hotel environment",* and *"I want to serve people with distinction"* etc. underscore such passion. According to Kim *et al.* (2010) passion for a career in hospitality stems from the personality and attitude of an individual. In the case of this study, the fact that the respondents surveyed were those at the third and final year of study, could mean that they have already begun developing such attitude and personality.

Career advice

In the literature review, career advice was highlighted as a factor that influence career choice. It was therefore not surprising that career advice also factored in strongly as a theme in the study. Many respondents noted that they received some form of career advice. The main sources of such advice was derived from career expositions, career counsellors, and open-days at Universities and well-known exhibitions such as the annual Tourism Indaba held in Durban. Findings from Chuang and Dellman-Jenkins's (2010) study stipulated that the reasons behind career choice emanated from the love of interaction with people at various organisations and at relevant events. The result of this study are also consistent with Kim *et al.* (2010) who found that career services offered is an important information source for learners but inconsistent with the aspect of previous work experience, from friends and lecturers/class activity or notes or personal experience. While the aspect of previous work or personal experience was not cited perhaps due to the youthfulness in terms of the respondent's age, the failure to mention class materials/ lecture notes represents a major concern in the quality of the theoretical content delivery. However, it is important to point out that respondents indicated (discussed later) being ready for WIL as informed by curriculum.

Job opportunities

The next theme that emerged was that of "job opportunities". The findings of the study reveal that the majority of the respondents were enthusiastic with regards to the prospect of gaining employment in the industry post studies. Such results equally suggest a high level of confidence in the hospitality sector creating job opportunities for local citizens. According to DEAT (1996), the tourism and hospitality sector represents a key contributor to job creation. In the face of a potential downgrade of South Africa's economy, presently, several economists have strongly advocate for the recognition of the role of the tourism sector to contribute towards improved economic growth and job creation to offset such a downgrade. Recent data from the Statistics South Africa (2014) indicate that rising tourism visits influenced employment within the industry. For example, the tourism industry job figures increased by 9 854, from 645 755 persons in 2012 to 655 609 persons in 2013. The tourism industry employs about 4.4% of all employed persons in South Africa (Statistics South Africa, 2014). However, it has been well documented in tourism studies that the job opportunities created within the hospitality industry maybe temporary in nature, following the seasons of the industry. During peak seasons and events that maybe occurring at specific times, the jobs maybe plentiful.
The four predominant themes (interest in the industry, passion, career advice and job opportunities) presented above are interrelated in that, all have a common thread of proclivity towards hospitality based on the factors that contributed to the student choosing a career in the hospitality field.

Perceptions of state of readiness for WIL

Table 1 below illustrate the degree of the respondent's state of readiness or preparedness for the WIL component. The results show that the majority of the respondents (42.5%) indicated that *"I am prepared"*, this was followed closely by those respondents (37.5%) who said   "*I am extremely prepared*". Few respondents (20%) reported not being sure. Overall, 80% of the respondents felt enthusiastic about being ready for WIL within the hospitality sector. The results imply that completion of the theoretical constructs within which hospitality management qualification is grounded may have been well received by the students. Additionally, the students may have become excited with regards to gaining practical experience as informed by theory. Despite this, the few students who remained unsure about getting into the WIL cannot be overlooked. Such a result may raise concerns with regards to the effectiveness of the strategies used in preparing learners for the WIL component. A key question in this regard

that requires further investigation is whether, allowing students to experience WIL for the first time at a final year of study is practical.

Table 1: Level of preparedness of students

How will you describe your state of readiness for WIL?		Percentage
	I am not sure	20
	I am prepared	42.5
	I am extremely prepared	37.5
	Total	100

To further examine the level of readiness or preparedness, respondents were asked to describe their current feelings about entering the work environment. The results as shown by Table 2 indicate that the majority of the respondents (67.5%) reported being "*excited*". Furthermore, 27.5% said they were "*nervous*", while the remaining few (5%) respondents indicated "*I don't actually feel anything*". Such findings do not only vindicate those in presented in Table 1, they underscore that students experience various feelings while in the process of engaging in WIL. While nervousness may been seen in a negative light, it is not uncommon for such to happen, especially in cases where an individual faces the unknown. Within such a context, nervousness could be read in line with excitement.

Table 2: Students feelings used to describe upon entering WIL

How will you describe your feelings for the upcoming WIL?		Percentage
	Nervous	27.5
	I don't actually feel anything	5
	Excited	67.5
	Total	100

Expected challenges linked to WIL

In order to further locate the perceptions of students regarding the WIL, a question was asked to the respondents to describe the possible challenges that they may experience during WIL. Such challenges are important factors to gauge as they may have an influence on the performance of WIL participants and their ability to fulfil relevant obligations. The salient challenge which students indicated was that of transport, to and from the workplace. Such a challenge is not uncommon as it is mainly linked to financial costs. A study conducted by Mouton, Louw and Strydom (2013) reveal that, a major challenge that students within HEIs face in South Africa is mainly linked to lack of financial resources. Furthermore, potential difficulties in transportation may result in students being late for work, or unable to get home from work. Hence, lack of transportation or the ability to source transportation may contribute to a negative impression from the employer of WIL students, which may lead to an unsuccessful WIL experience. Therefore, a concerted effort is required from both the HEIs and the hospitality stakeholders to recognize such a challenge and propose ways in which it could be mitigated and be mutually beneficial. For example, students on WIL could be seen by their relevant organization as providing value added service, or providing relief for regular employees especially during peak periods and therefore be offered financial related incentives including transportation.

The expectations of working daily also emerged as main challenge cited by the respondents as having a potential to affect WIL. As much as students may be eager to experience the practical component of their studies, working everyday may be confining as opposed to the familiar daily life that tertiary education offers. WIL can therefore be said to take a student out of their 'comfort zone' and resident environment. It is important to postulate on the idea that WIL in many cases, may take a students out of their geographic confines, into possibly a new province. This may prove to be a daunting task for a student who is accustomed to a routine of familiarity, camaraderie and family support.

Conclusion

This study has addressed student's voices with regards to WIL in the hospitality sector, from a pre-assessment basis and within HEIs in South Africa. The study mirrors previous views linked to WIL as an important facet enshrined within the hospitality curriculum as a vocational program. The study found that the theory taught within the classrooms are relevant and necessary to meet industry requirements, given the positive responses received. As a departure point, students were mostly found to have chosen the hospitality program as a career choice, mainly influenced by having attended an HEI open day, career exposition and other related tourism events. Furthermore, general interests in the industry, passion, career advice and the job opportunities presented were notable push factors for student's choice of wanting to engage in the hospitality industry. Although few students indicated feeling nervous with regards to WIL, this study has revealed a rather enthusiastic response pre-WIL. Students are mostly concerned about transportation, to and from their place of training as a challenge that could limit their effectiveness to excel at WIL. Additionally, the fact that WIL may require a change of environment and geographic location also represent a challenge.

Most of the respondents who qualify to begin WIL are mainly young and may see the WIL experience as an opportunity to spring board their hospitality careers. The interest, passion and enthusiasm displayed by such students' needs to be harnessed and guided by the stakeholders involved. Such stakeholders may include the HEIs, governmental organizations and institutions that absorb WIL learners. The challenges outlined should be considered in the development of curriculum, policies and strategies that are designed towards a growth-orientated WIL that meets the government and sector objectives, benefit all the stakeholders concerned. WIL is an important component that has been acknowledged as having the potential to develop skilled citizen that could enhance job creation and economic growth (Nicolaides, 2015). Furthermore, WIL provides the student with the opportunity to gain the experiences which are important in the quest for future job opportunities if, they are not absorbed or integrated at their WIL work place.

Study limitations and future research

The findings of this study should be read in line with the following limitations. Firstly, the study was biased to only three HEI in South Africa. Secondly, only students who were eligible to enter WIL program for the first time were considered. This represents that, the views of such students at other HEIs were missing. Compounding to the researchers problem was that the chosen sample was difficult to obtain from all HEIs as most have a different schedule for the commencement of WIL. Therefore future research along similar lines should consider a longitudinal approach to data collection in other to generate a more representative sample. Another research can be conducted with a specific focus on a post WIL survey with the aim to gauge whether there is any change in students' perceptions of WIL.

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