

# Tourism students' post-placement opinions of Work Integrated Learning (WIL)

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## **Abstract**

Anecdotal evidence suggests that tourism students' benefit from Work Integrated Learning (WIL) placements. The main goal of this research is to provide primary evidence of tourism students' experiences of work integrated learning and to suggest remedial action. The study involved an analysis of tourism students' WIL reports from 2010 to 2015. The reports were completed at the end of the WIL placement and submitted to the Department of Tourism Management at Tshwane University of Technology for final assessment. Content analysis was used to derive codes by highlighting exact words from text that appeared to capture the key thoughts and concepts expressed by students. The initial coding scheme came directly from the text and were then sorted into different categories based on the relationship of codes. The advantage of this method was that it allowed for an analysis based on direct information from WIL students' without imposing preconceived categories or theoretical perspectives. Results of the study support the numerous benefits of WIL and provide essential feedback and suggestions from WIL 'participants. Students reported their satisfaction with the WIL program and further connected the work experience to enhanced personal and professional development. This research provides valuable information to both academic institutions and future employers and can be used as a basis from which to improve the WIL program and training of WIL students.

**Keywords:** Tourism, Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), co-operative education, internships, students perceptions, content analysis.

## **Introduction**

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) has, on a global scale, become an essential component of educational preparation for tourism students and many courses emphasise the importance of practical training and develop WIL programs for students (Lam & Ching, 2007:336, Nduna, 2012:233). WIL is considered a unique feature of Universities of Technology (UoTs) that directly connects these institutions with the world of work, thereby ensuring the relevance of the offerings (Bohloko, 2012:268). Prior to 1994, South African higher education consisted of universities and technikons. Technikons focused on the technical study fields with an enhanced practical stance on training, as one-third of the study period consisted of on-the-job training. This exposed students to the work of work at an early stage and provided technikon-graduates with an edge over university graduates, who received theoretical training in a specialised field. According to Bokholo (2012:268), after the democratic elections in 1994 educational reconfiguration was necessary to abolish the binary between universities and technikons as well as the concept of institutional differentiation. The latter took the form of mergers and incorporations, which resulted in the establishment of universities of technology (UoTs), UoTs were seen to be a sector better placed to respond to the demand of employers (Bokholo, 2012:268). WIL was seen as a unique feature of UoTs, which would make students more skilled, competent and employable (CHE, 2006; 2010). WIL provides the opportunity and

learning landscape for students to experience professional practice activities which directly relate to the application of knowledge (Beggs, Ross & Goodwin, 2008; Choy & Delahaye, 2011; Jamil, Shariff & Abu, 2013; Ju, Emenheiser, Clayton & Reynolds, 2007; Ko, 2007; Petrillose & Montgomery, 1997; Ross & Elechi, 2002; Stanley, 2005; Yiu & Law, 2012; Zopiatis, 2007; Zopiatis & Theocharous, 2013).

The dynamic growth of tourism courses bears witness to the rising profile of tourism specifically to the needs of those organisations involved in promoting and responding to the demand for tourism (Busby & Brunt, 1997:105; Collins, 2002:94; Leslie & Richardson, 2000: 489). However the sector is characterised by high levels of labour turnover and reports of poor image in the eyes of students (Kelley-Patterson & George, 2001:312) which may result in greater challenges for recruiting and retaining high calibre staff. Due to increasing competitive society, students are facing a selective job market that places a premium on experience (Cannon & Arnold, 2010: 202; Groenewald & Shurink, 2003:93; Ko, 2007: 2; Yiu & Law, 2012:379) and relevant employment experience is a valuable attribute for gaining an entry-level position (Alpert, Heaney & Kuhk, 2009:36). Research has indicated that students completing WIL are better prepared for employment (Bohloko, 2012: 270; Hurst & Good, 2009:175; Kay & DeVeau, 2013:24).

In April 2010 the first draft of the Framework for the National Skills Development Strategy (NSD) was launched (DHET, 2010) and for the first time workplace learning could become a viable supplement to institutional learning and should no longer be seen as the invisible dimension of learning (Wait, 2014:1682). For WIL to be effective, students need to be involved in all stages of the learning process, they need to be led to the practice of WIL and to reflect on it. Reflection on WIL is used to support learning, students' professional development and disciplinary competence (Sykes & Dean, 2013:179). If it was known what students expect from their WIL and what makes them satisfied with WIL programs, there would be a greater possibility of creating valuable WIL opportunities (Cho, 2006:62; Ko, 2007:3; Lam & Ching, 2007:337; Rudman & Terblanche, 2012; Yiu & Law, 2012:379). The main goal of this research is to provide primary evidence of tourism students' experiences of work integrated learning and to suggest remedial action. This information will assist academic institutions, employers and students to better prepare for future placements. The specific objectives are: (1) to analyse the WIL reports of tourism students and (2) to report on the outcomes of tourism students WIL reports and make recommendations. This paper represents the experiences, assessments and reflections of tourism students who have completed their WIL placements.

## Literature review

Internship programs have existed for more than 100 years (Weible, 2010:59) and are defined in various ways and called by various names. According to the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2011:4), WIL describes the curricular, pedagogic and assessment practices that integrate formal learning and workplace concerns through the integration of theory and practice. The importance, necessity and benefits of WIL have been extensively documented (Beggs *et al.*, 2008; Benecke & Bezuidenhout, 2011; Bevan & Kipka, 2012; Collins, 2002; Cho, 2006; Jamil *et al.*, 2013; Ju *et al.*, Ko, 2007; 2007; Tse, 2010; Weible, 2010; Zopiatis, 2007) however research indicates that students do not view their placement experiences very positively (Tse, 2010:252). In a study conducted by Cho (2006) regarding students perspectives on the quality of hotel management internships, it was found that the overall satisfaction level was lower than the overall expectation level. Satisfaction on all internship issues was statistically lower than expectations which indicated that expectations were not fully met (Cho, 2006:69).

In a study conducted by Ju *et al.*, (2007) on South Korean students' perceptions of their internships in hospitality, only 10% of the responding students agreed that they were satisfied overall with the internship (2007:42). Lam and Ching (2007:345) found that student perception scores about their internship was lower than the expectation score in the study of tourism and hospitality schools and colleges in Hong Kong. Ross and Elechi (2002) analysed the attitudes

of students towards internship experiences and found that students did not think their supervisor was helpful and felt misused during the internship experience (2002:305). In a holistic investigation of hospitality internship practices, Zopiatis and Theocharous (2013:38) indicate that there are notable differences between students' perceptions and expectations, with expectations being unmet. Ko (2007:11) conducted a case study of Universities in Taiwan among hospitality students and found that administration of WIL should be more systematic and more care should be taken in dealing with students' internship programs. The results of these studies may prove to be useful in a South African context as they provide the basis from which to explore WIL. The review of the literature identifies that there are gaps between the expectations and perceptions of students' regarding WIL, but very few provide an account of the views of students about the internship. While previous studies may illustrate contrasting views of WIL by educators and employers, students' experiences represent an increasingly important viewpoint that has largely been ignored in South Africa and other countries. No available literature was found on the experiences of South African tourism students with regard to their WIL placements (Ju *et al.*, 2007:38), Students are ideally situated to observe and experience all the workings of WIL throughout the duration (Ralph, Walker & Wimmer, 2007:132) and in final analysis are the most suitably qualified to render judgement on the effectiveness of the program structure and processes involved.

WIL aims at fostering the learning transfer and considers students' actual tasks, personal competency disposition and work domain as being relevant for deriving current learning needs (Ley, Ulbrich, Scheir, Linstaedt, Kump & Albert, 2008:31). WIL is embraced as an effective educational tool by academic institutions (Van Rooijen, 2011:96), but the success of this depends on the full involvement of the three stakeholders involved in the process, namely; the academic institution, employers and students. The number of research studies that highlight the voice of the students who have completed their WIL placements is relatively small (Ralph & Walker, 2007:130) and students often tend to be disregarded by policy-makers and program administrators (Clift & Brady, 2005:394). Accordingly if the benefits of WIL are limited to students simply gaining workplace experience, then the effectiveness of WIL is not fully developed (Wait, 2014:1682).

Students are the only individuals who have direct, daily and intimate involvement with all aspects of the teaching/learning situation (Ralph & Walker, 2007:130) and it is therefore necessary to analyse post placement data in order to improve current practices. The Department of Tourism Management at the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) has a mandatory six month WIL program. Students are eligible to attend WIL upon completion of the two and a half year theoretical academic preparation. Students are required to find placement at a tourism establishment whereupon the employer submits a letter of employment to the Department of Tourism Management at TUT and students are registered for WIL. Students receive a WIL report (logbook), which details the WIL program. The report consists of student and company information, a student undertaking, the mission statements of the University, co-operative education department and the Department of Tourism Management, the aims and objectives of WIL, the stakeholder advantages, the curriculum, requirements of WIL, registration for WIL, guidelines for stakeholders and the WIL assessment and logbook. Students are required to complete an assignment which is based on the placement establishment and at the end of every month, students are required to submit a work-log. The work-log details the department in which the student is conducting training, the duties undertaken by the student in that month as well as the working hours of the student. The supervisor provides a response and rating of the student, at the end of each month and is based on the duties assigned to the student. Students are interviewed by the Department of Tourism's WIL coordinator at the end of three months training, in order to gain insight into the experience of the student. At the end of the six month training period, students and employers submit a final evaluation. This evaluation, together with the assignment and interview all form part of the final assessment for WIL.

The main goal of this research is to provide primary evidence of tourism students' experiences of work integrated learning and to suggest remedial action. Permission to conduct research into the WIL reports of students who had already completed WIL was obtained from the Ethics Committee at TUT. No identifying information related to students was used in the research process. The researcher conducted a thorough analysis of the literature pertaining to content analysis as a method of data collection prior to evaluating WIL reports. All prior literature and research conducted reflects hospitality student reports and there was no available research on tourism students WIL reports in South Africa.

## **Research Methodology**

A qualitative research method was used to extract meanings attributed by students to their WIL experience. Conceptual content analysis was applied to placement reports of 461 students at the Department of Tourism Management at Tshwane University of Technology (TUT). Students completing a three year diploma or degree usually attend WIL in the last six months of their third year. Therefore students who started WIL in July 2015 had not yet completed WIL and were not included in the study. The reports analysed from October 2015 to December 2015 were those of all tourism students who completed their WIL from 2010 to 2015.

The foundation of WIL is learning through work and it is argued that if the benefits of WIL are limited to students simply gaining workplace experience then the effectiveness of WIL is not fully developed (Wait, 2014:1682). The National Skills Development Strategy (NSD) developed by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) (2010:9) will operate in a new environment, where workplace learning can become a visible supplement to institutional learning and should no longer be seen as the invisible dimension of learning (Wait, 2014:1684). This indicates that government is serious about WIL initiatives and that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa will have to include WIL programmes as part of their courses. WIL is a distinctive part of universities of technology (UoTs) and will become even more important due to the growing demand and need in industry and commerce for graduates who are job-ready (Bokholo, 2012:270; Du Pre, 2009:26). The importance of WIL as a distinctive part of UoTs and the perceived advantage it offers UoT students formed the basis of this research. It is important to understand what benefits students gain from WIL placements and to identify the advantages of WIL from the students' perspective.

In conceptual content analysis, a concept is chosen for examination, and the analysis involves quantifying and counting its presence (Busch, De Maret, Flynn, Le, Meyers, Saunder, White & Palmquist, 2012:3). The focus is on looking at the occurrence of selected terms within text or texts which may be implicit or explicit. Coding for implicit terms can be subjective and to overcome this, the researcher made use of contextual translation rules and the Oxford dictionary. A saturation sample was used for all WIL reports from 2010-2015. The sample included all tourism students, from all four of the tourism diploma's on offer at TUT, who had completed WIL from 2010-2015. The analysis for this study was conducted on the WIL assessment section of the log book where students were asked to comment on various topics regarding the WIL program. Students' comments for each topic were recorded in an excel spreadsheet, prior to coding and analysis. The first step of the analysis was to reduce the text from each topic into categories consisting of a word or phrase. Each category was then coded according to contextual translation rules and finally the category occurrence was calculated using the excel COUNTIF function. The category occurrence was also manually counted in order to reduce bias and verify results. The key findings of the analysis are discussed in the following section.

## **Key Findings**

The key findings of these reports will provide a conceptual content analysis of the topics commented on by students. The distribution across qualifications and year of completion is shown in Table 1 below.

**Table 1:** Distribution of the students whose placement reports were analysed

Year of completion	Ecotourism Management	Event Management	Adventure Tourism	Tourism Management	Total
2010	0	0	2	93	95
2011	4	4	5	60	73
2012	6	7	6	49	68
2013	13	12	4	53	82
2014	19	26	5	67	117
2015	3	5	1	17	26
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>339</b>	<b>461</b>

The majority of reports analysed were from students completing the National Diploma Tourism Management qualification. Reports indicated that all tourism students across all four Diplomas offered at TUT completed WIL placements with hotels, lodges, travel agencies, tour operators, government institutions, transport organisations, nature and game reserves, adventure tourism organisations, educational institutions and tour wholesalers.

Table 2 shows the categories of importance in terms of the personal development of students during WIL.

**Table 2:** Personal Development of student

Importance Ranking	Categories	Number of mentions among 450 students
1	Responsibility	140
2	Decision making	136
3	People skills/inter-personal skills	80
4	Confidence	68
5	Communication Skills	57
6	Team work	41
7	Initiative	39
8	Customer relations	30
9	Time management	27
10	Work under pressure	23
11	Problem solving	19
12	Accountability	9

In terms of personal development, students identified various skills gained during WIL. Responsibility was the most frequently mentioned skill acquired by students. The move from an academic institution environment to a business environment can be difficult for students, but with the skills gained during WIL, these students should make the transition easier than those who have no industry experience. Decision making was ranked second in importance and empowers students to make decisions by themselves in a business environment. The skills acquired during placement are essential to the Tourism industry and vital to any business environment and are generally difficult to learn in a classroom environment. WIL provides students the opportunity to develop these skills prior to graduation and therefore increases their employability.

Table 3 identifies the categories related to the Professional development of students.

**Table 3:** Professional Development of students

Importance Ranking	Categories	Number of mentions from 435 students
1	Skills acquired	195
2	Experience and exposure	106
3	Practical understanding of industry	54

The majority of students indicated that the skills acquired during WIL contributed to their professional development. These skills empower students and are acquired more effectively through placements than in a classroom. Experience and exposure was important for students as they were exposed to the business environment while under supervision. Students mentioned aspects such as “*networking*”, “*dealing with industry*”, “*meeting and working with senior staff*”. A practical understanding of the industry allowed students to apply their theoretical knowledge in a business environment, which aided in the understanding of what is taught in the academic program.

Table 4 identifies the main advantage for students undertaking WIL placements.

**Table 4:** Main advantage of undertaking WIL

Importance Ranking	Categories	Number of mentions from 395 students
1	Exposure and experience	123
2	Skills developed	60
3	Additional training	35
4	Permanent position	16

The main advantage for students was the experience received during WIL and the exposure to the business environment and the real world of work. These two aspects give students the advantage over students who do not complete WIL training as upon graduation they already have practical experience in the tourism industry. Once again, students mentioned the skills they had developed during training as an advantage and the additional training provided by employers was also mentioned. A few students mentioned their main advantage as receiving a permanent position. This question was not specifically asked and therefore is not a true reflection of the number of students who may have been offered a permanent position upon completion of WIL. The number of students who answered this question and the responses received, indicate the benefits that students have experienced as a result of WIL.

Table 5 identifies the main disadvantage students experienced during WIL.

**Table 5:** Main disadvantage of WIL

Importance Ranking	Categories	Number of mentions from 136 students
1	Problems associated with the hosting company	49
2	Not enough work	27
3	No payment	22

4	Abuse of students	14
5	Working hours and overtime	14
6	Problems associated with academic program	10

It is important to note that only 136 of the 461 students provided a disadvantage of WIL. The most frequently stated disadvantage was that of problems associated with the hosting company. Some of the reasons given were; “no frequent feedback from employer”, “no direct supervisor”, “not a corporate environment”, “old reservation system”, “excluded from certain events and decisions”. This information is useful for the academic institution and future employers in order to improve the WIL process. Many students felt that they did not have enough work to do and therefore were not learning much. No payment, abuse of students and long hours all lead to the feeling of being “taken advantage of” by the company. Students felt that they should not be doing menial tasks, such as making beds or cleaning. While these aspects may be justifiable in some instances, it is important to understand the size of the organisation where the student is undertaking WIL. In smaller organisations, this type of work may be required from WIL students, due to the limited number of staff, but it is important for organisations to see students’ as good value for money rather than cheap labour. In all respects, students’ should be treated the same as employees of an organisation (Jamil *et al.*, 2013:520). These aspects must be dealt with by the academic institution and explained to students’ prior to WIL placement. Students need to understand that payment is not guaranteed, working hours in service organisations are long and very busy over holidays and weekends and certain jobs require students to learn all aspects of the job, including cleaning and making beds. A few students listed problems associated to the academic program such as “WIL is too long”, “lack of communication with the academic institution” and “submitting monthly reports at the academic institution”. The academic institution can use this information to improve the administrative procedure of WIL. The researcher suggests an online format for students to submit monthly reports.

Table 6 indicates the job satisfaction of students with WIL.

**Table 6:** Job satisfaction

Importance Ranking	Categories	Number of mentions from 421 students
1	Satisfied	144
2	Good/OK/Happy	116
3	Very/Extremely Satisfied	72
4	Not satisfied	33
5	Challenging	16

Majority of students indicated that they were either satisfied, good/ok/happy or very/extremely satisfied with the WIL experience. This is extremely important as the purpose of WIL is to provide experience and practical training in industry. The fact that majority of students are satisfied with this experience proves the benefits of WIL. There were a few students who found WIL challenging and those that expressed dissatisfaction with WIL. Some of the reasons provided for dissatisfaction were; “needed more challenge”, “no recognition, focused only on mistakes”, “worked long hours” and “work was repetitive”. The reasons provided validate the disadvantages listed in Table 5 where students identified problems with the hosting organisation. There were no statements regarding the academic program of WIL.

Table 7 identifies the overall impression that students had of the WIL experience.

**Table 7:** Overall impression of the WIL experience

Importance Ranking	Categories	Number of mentions from 436 students
1	Positive impression	411
2	Negative impression	45

An overwhelming majority of students stated that they had a positive impression of WIL, while 45 students stated a negative impression. Reasons provided for a negative impression were; *“supervisor showed little interest”, “no payment”, “a lot to learn in just 6 months”, “not busy sometimes”* and *“work hard long hours with difficult co-workers”*. These responses correspond with the disadvantages listed in Table 5 and the not satisfied responses in Table 6 where categories related to problems associated with the hosting company. Once again the positive impression of WIL indicates that the importance of industry placements is recognised by students.

Table 8 provides recommendations from students for changes in the academic program.

**Table 8:** Changes suggested by students after completing WIL

Importance Ranking	Categories	Number of mentions from 256 students
1	Other courses and training	65
2	Assist students with finding placement	56
3	More contact from UoT during WIL	40
4	More practical during study	40
5	Change the length of WIL	16
6	Introduce WIL to 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> years	8

Most of the students listed other courses and training as their suggestion to improve the academic program. These included various skills as well as industry related computer programs and subjects. A few students suggested that academic institutions either place students or assist them with finding placement for WIL. Students requested more contact with the academic institution during the WIL period as well as more practical training in the academic program. These suggestions are important to the academic institution as they provide first hand knowledge from students who have completed their qualifications. Academic institutions have the opportunity to make valid and recommended changes in order to make the transition for students easier.

## Conclusions

The findings of this study provide valuable information for academic institutions and employers as to the understanding of how students view their placement experiences. The importance of the placements to students has been verified through the number of skills acquired and the positive attributes discussed. Most of the students were satisfied with the experience and for those who were dissatisfied, reasons relating to the hosting employer were identified. This information can assist academic institutions in improving the academic program as well as the process of WIL. Academic institutions must collaborate with employers to address the negative aspects related to WIL in order to improve and ensure that WIL is of a high standard for all

students. By providing feedback to employers and hosting information and advisory sessions, academic institutions can build positive relationships with industry, which would provide the basis for positive WIL placements. The opportunity for better WIL preparation must be acknowledged and academic institutions should include this as part of their WIL preparations. An understanding of the aspects identified in the study will be vital to the preparation process.

This study considered the placement of 461 students in the Tourism Management Department at TUT and cannot be generalised for other programs or institutions. The information can however be used as a reference for other institutions and academic programs in the sense that it provides useful insights which may be of interest to them.

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