

# Tourism students' evaluation of work-integrated learning: A Post placement analysis

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to analyse the post-placement evaluations of tourism students' work integrated learning (WIL). The study involved an analysis of WIL reports from 2010 to 2015. The WIL reports were completed at the end of the WIL placement period and submitted to the Department of Tourism Management at Tshwane University of Technology for final assessment. Using 461 completed WIL placement reports; the study analysed the tourism students' evaluations of WIL. Three topics were used to analyse the evaluations, namely; supervision, co-workers and self-evaluation. The Kruscal-Wallis test analyses, Mann-Whitney test analyses and Spearman's rho correlations were used to analyse the data. The key findings of this research indicate that qualification type, payment for WIL and gender have an effect on the outcome of tourism students' evaluations of their WIL experience.

**Keywords:** Tourism, Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), WIL students, supervision, co-workers.

## Introduction

As a result of the global recession of 2009, today's society is highly competitive and the job market discerning, placing a premium on experience. It has become increasingly difficult for University students to gain employment when graduating as they lack the necessary experience and skills the job market requires (Kim, 2014). The tourism industry needs a skilled, educated and well-trained workforce in order to be successful in the competitive market and the tourism industry wants staff with experience. The combination of learning and experience allows students to become active participants in their own education (Yiu & Law, 2012:377). Work Integrated Learning (WIL) demonstrates that theory reflects practice thus providing a meaningful link between what is theoretically learned in a classroom and what is practiced in the industry. This experience enables students to apply theoretical knowledge within the actual working world thereby bridging the gap between theory and practice (Zopiatis, 2013:34).

WIL, in its various forms, has existed for more than 100 years and extensive research

regarding various aspects of WIL has been conducted (Groenewald & Shurink, 2013; Hurst & Good, 2010; Kay & DeVeau, 2013; Pitout, 2009; Rudman & Terblanche, 2012; Stanley, 2005; Stone & McLaren, 2006; Wait, 2014; Weible, 2010; Yiu & Law, 2012; Zopiatis & Theocharous, 2013). While previous literature may be extensive, there is very little research regarding WIL in the tourism industry in South Africa, specifically students' post-placement perspectives. 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 judgment on the effectiveness of the program structure and processes involved (Taylor & Geldenhuys, 2016:3).

It is increasingly evident that WIL is an essential part of educational preparation (Cho, 2006:62), and students are increasingly demanding more effective ways to acquire professional skills and to reduce uncertainty in the educational process (Ju, Emenheiser, Clayton & Reynolds, 2007:37). 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 realized (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 students' post placement results in order to improve current practices.

In order to analyse the WIL experience of tourism students at TUT, post-placement reports of the National Diploma Tourism Management, National Diploma Adventure Tourism, National Diploma in Ecotourism and National Diploma in Event Management from the Department of Tourism Management were analysed. The research objectives driving this study are as follows:

- To analyse tourism students' evaluations of supervision during WIL
- To analyse tourism students' evaluations of co-workers during WIL
- To analyse tourism students' self-evaluations during WIL

The article provides insight in the existing literature on WIL, stakeholder perspectives, students' views and the importance of WIL. The research methods and procedures used in the study are explained and the results presented and discussed. Finally, implications, limitations, and directions for future research are offered.

## **Literature Review**

The dynamic growth of tourism courses since the 1980s presents evidence of the rising profile of tourism, as an economic factor and the needs of the organisations involved in promoting and responding to the demand for tourism (Leslie & Richardson, 2000:489). A successful tourism academic programme produces graduates with high quality learning, knowledge, skills and the ability to meet the needs of the industry (Beggs, Ross & Goodwin, 2008; Goeldner & Ritchie, 2006; Harris & Zhao, 2004; Kok, 2000). In order to achieve this, there has always been significant emphasis placed on students gaining practical experience in industry (Beggs et al., 2008:32). Practical experience is an increasingly essential component of educational preparation for tourism graduates and many academic curricula include compulsory student work experience to complement the traditional classroom theory (Tse, 2010:251). Practical experience is defined in many ways and referred to using various names, such as; student work experience, internships, experiential learning, cooperative education, sandwich placements, work integrated learning or work integration education.

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) is an umbrella term used to describe curricular, pedagogic and assessment practices, across a series of academic disciplines, that integrate formal learning and workplace matters (CHE, 2011:4). The overall objective of WIL is to enhance students' learning by integrating practical work experience with classroom teaching (Yiu & Law, 2012:378). Recent research into the area of tourism students' views of their WIL experience is scarce.

The relationship between theoretical education and practical experience has been widely researched, providing research on the roles of stakeholders in WIL (Yiu & Law, 2012; Stanley, 2005; Choy & Delahaye, 2011), benefits of WIL (Weible, 2010; Pitout, 2009; Zopiatis & Theocharous, 2013; Rudman & Terblanche, 2012; Leslie & Richardson, 2000), expectations of WIL (Cannon & Arnold, 2010; Kelley-Patterson & George, 2001; Stone & McLaren, 1999; Emslie, 2009), perceptions of WIL (Petrillose & Montgomery, 1998; Lam & Ching, 2007; Ross & Elechi, 2002; Kay & DeVeau, 2013; Cho, 2006; Tse, 2010; Beggs et al., 2008; Ju, Emenheiser, Clayton & Reynolds, 2007) and the contribution of WIL (Walo, 2001; Zopiatis, 2007; Groenewald & Schurink, 2003). 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, but very few provide an account of the evaluations of tourism students' post WIL placement (Taylor & Geldenhuys, 2016:3).

Students are key stakeholders in the WIL process and, as such, it is important to understand their experience of WIL. Emslie (2009:66) states that students are generally "talked about" rather than "talked with" when it comes to WIL, treated as the objects rather than the active participants of the WIL process. It is clear that if academic institutions and employers are serious about improving the quality of tourism placements, then listening to and learning first hand from students is critical. This article is written with the intention of filling the gap in literature and providing valuable feedback on student experiences in order to assist the various stakeholders of WIL.

## **Research methodology**

The target population for this study consisted of all tourism students in the Department of Tourism Management at Tshwane University of Technology, who had successfully completed their WIL placement between 2010 and 2015. Students are required to complete WIL in the last six months of the three-year diploma. This practical experience takes place in the tourism industry and students' complete and submit an assignment. Both students and supervisors complete the WIL logbook at the end of the WIL period. The analysis for this article was conducted on the "evaluation by student" section of the logbook where students were asked to evaluate three topics, namely their supervision, co-workers and the self-evaluation. A saturation sample was used and included all tourism students, from all four of the tourism diploma's on offer at TUT, who had completed WIL from 2010-2015. The reports were analysed from October 2015 to December 2015 and the final realised sample included a total of 461 usable reports. Students' were asked to rate five supervision criteria, six co-worker criteria and five self-evaluation criteria on a five-point scale (always, frequently, sometimes, seldom and never).

Descriptive statistics were used to create a profile of respondents and provide insight into their evaluations of supervisors, co-workers and a self-evaluation. Spearman's rank order correlation was used on all criteria statements to determine the strength and direction of relationships between variables. The Kruskal Wallis test was performed on all criteria statements to determine statistically significant differences between type of qualification, industry where WIL was done and year of completion of WIL. Mann-Whitney U tests were performed on all criteria statements, in order to determine if there were any differences in views based on gender and payment of WIL.

## Key Findings

WIL reports contained demographic information of respondents and Table 1 below provides a descriptive profile of the 461 respondents. The sample was dominated by female respondents (72,70%) and majority of the respondents were registered for the National Diploma in Tourism Management (73,50%). The year of completion of WIL indicated fewer respondents for 2015 (5,60%) than in previous years. This can be attributed to the fact that reports were analysed from October 2015 to December 2015 thereby excluding WIL students who finished their six month practical at the end of 2015. Payment for WIL indicates that slightly more respondents (55,30%) were paid during their WIL placement than not, and most placements were completed within the hospitality industry (44,30%).

**Table 1: Profile of respondents**

	Demographic Variables	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	27,30%
	Female	<b>72,70%</b>
National Diploma (ND)	ND Ecotourism Management	9,80%
	ND Event Management	11,70%
	ND Adventure Tourism Management	5,00%
	ND Tourism Management	<b>73,50%</b>
Year of WIL completion	2010	20,60%
	2011	15,60%
	2012	15,00%
	2013	17,80%
	2014	25,40%
	2015	5,60%
Payment for WIL	Paid	<b>55,30%</b>
	Unpaid	44,70%
Industry where WIL was completed	Hospitality	<b>44,30%</b>
	Wholesale	5,90%
	Retail	10,60%
	Adventure/Entertainment	10,00%
	Government	12,40%
	Transport	3,50%
	Services	2,40%
	Education	11,00%

Spearman rho correlations were calculated to determine the strength and direction of relationships. Preliminary analyses showed relationships to be monotonic, as assessed by a visual inspection of scatterplots. Table 2 provides a summary of the moderate and strong correlations between the criteria.

**Table 2: Spearman rho correlations**

	V50 Did your supervisor appear interested in you as an individual?	V54 Did you get along with co-workers?	V56 Did co-workers show an interest in the company?	V57 Did co-workers show a willingness to improve themselves?	V58 We communicated effectively with each other	V59 My co-workers cooperated with each other to accomplish work	V62 Did you receive adequate training in your job?
V50 Did your supervisor appear interested in you as an individual?			.399**				
V51 Did your supervisor provide for adequate training?							.512**
V52 Did your supervisor motivate you to improve yourself?				.312**			
V53 Did you receive adequate instructions from your supervisor?	.383**						
V54 Did you get along with co-workers?					.402**		
V56 Did co-workers show an interest in the company?				.476**			
V57 Did co-workers show a willingness to improve themselves?						.427**	
V59 My co-workers cooperated with each other to accomplish work			.454**				
V63 I understood my duties and responsibilities							.313**
V64 Did the work atmosphere allow for the expression of your ideas?	.384**						

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 2 provides the most significant correlations for each variable and only moderate and strong correlations were presented. The strongest positive correlation existed between “Did your supervisor provide for adequate training” and “Did you receive adequate training in your job”, (.512). This indicates that students who received adequate training in their jobs, had supervisors who provided adequate training. This correlation indicates that organisations that provide competent supervisors to provide training during WIL results in students’ who received adequate training. Moderate positive correlations existed for all other variables in Table 3. “Did co-workers show an interest in the company” correlated with “Did your supervisor appear interested in you as an individual” (.399) and “My co-workers cooperated with each other to accomplish work”, (.454). “Did your supervisor appear interested in you as an individual” moderately correlated with “Did you receive adequate instructions from your supervisor” (.383) and “Did the work atmosphere allow for the expression of your ideas” (.384). “Did co-workers show a willingness to improve themselves” moderately correlated with “Did you supervisor motivate you to improve yourself” (.312) and “Did co-workers show an interest in the company” (.476). These correlations all indicate a positive working environment where employers are interested in the organisation and as such take an interest in the WIL student. The more positive the working environment, the higher the chances of WIL students’ receiving adequate WIL training as supervisors appear interested in the outcome.

Kruskal Wallis Tests were conducted to determine if there were any differences in criteria between qualification types, industry where WIL was done and year of completion of WIL. Distributions of criteria were not similar across qualification type, industry where WIL was done and year of completion of WIL, as assessed by a visual inspection of boxplots. The mean rank of criteria was not statistically significant for industry where will was done and year of completion of WIL. Table 3 provides a summary of the mean ranks of criteria scores that were statistically significantly different between qualification type groups.

**Table 3: Kruskal Wallis Test for criteria and qualification type**

	V49 Was your immediate supervisor of assistance in you developing relationships with co-workers?	V50 Did your supervisor appear interested in you as an individual?	V62 Did you receive adequate training in your job?
Chi-Square	8.463	8.828	7.958
df	3	3	3
Asymp. Sig.	.037	.032	.047
<b>Mean Rank</b>			
Ecotourism	212.49	227.96	258.46
Event	220.04	186.99	208.73
Adventure	<b>289.30</b>	<b>265.75</b>	<b>275.98</b>
Tourism	225.76	232.01	225.73

a. Kruskal Wallis Test

b. Grouping variable: Qualification Type

Statistically significant differences were found between criteria and qualification type. The mean ranks for “was your supervisor of assistance in you developing relationships with co-workers” were statistically significantly different between Ecotourism Management (212.49), Event Management (220.04), Adventure Tourism Management (289.30) and Tourism Management (225.76),  $\chi^2(3) = 8.463$ ,  $p = .037$ . This suggests that Adventure Tourism students had the highest supervisor assistance with relationship scores, with the Ecotourism students reporting the lowest. The WIL placement of Adventure Tourism students usually occurs within environments that require students to work with qualified adventure guides, due to the inherent risk associated with adventure activities (Davidson, Ewert & Chang, 2016:164). The relationship between students and co-workers is therefore

important to the outcome of the adventure activity. Ecotourism students' generally find placements in nature reserves, game reserves and lodges and eco lodges. The nature of the work required by Ecotourism students means that they generally work independently and as such would not require as much assistance from supervisors with regard to relationships. The mean ranks for "did your supervisor appear interested in you as an individual" were statistically significantly different between Ecotourism Management (227.96), Event Management (186.99), Adventure Tourism Management (265.75) and Tourism Management (232.01),  $\chi^2(3) = 8.828$ ,  $p = .032$ . Adventure Tourism students had the highest interest shown scores with Event students reporting the lowest. Based on the nature of the activities and risks of activities undertaken by Adventure tourism students it is evident that supervisors are involved with these students and show an interest in their progression. However, Event management students work in environments where they are required to work independently. The mean ranks for receiving adequate instructions from your supervisor were statistically significantly different between Ecotourism Management (258.46), Event Management (208.73), Adventure Tourism Management (275.98) and Tourism Management (225.73),  $\chi^2(3) = 7.958$ ,  $p = .047$ . The highest reporting scores for receiving adequate instructions from supervisor were for Adventure Tourism students with Event students reporting the lowest. These results could be ascribed to the type of activities undertaken by Adventure tourism students. Due to the risks involved with adventure tourism it is vitally important for supervisors to provide adequate instructions. Adventure Tourism organisations are often smaller with employees working closely and with clearly defined roles. Event management organisations often require students to be highly organized, be able to plan and co-ordinate and manage multiple tasks and time (Lee, Lee & Kim, 2009:62). This indicates that supervisors require event management students to be able to work without instruction.

Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted to determine if there were differences in criteria scores between males and females and paid and unpaid students. Distributions of engagement for males and females and paid and unpaid were similar, as assessed by visual inspections. Table 4 below, provides a summary of the median scores for paid and unpaid that were statistically significantly different. Table 5, provides a summary of the median scores for males and females that were statistically significantly different.

**Table 4: Mann-Whitney U Test for criteria and payment of WIL**

	V49 Was your immediate supervisor of assistance in you developing relationships with co-workers?	V50 Did your supervisor appear interested in you as an individual?	V51 Did your supervisor provide for adequate training?	V52 Did your supervisor motivate you to improve yourself?	V58 We communicated effectively with each other	V62 Did you receive adequate training in your job?	V64 Did the work atmosphere allow for the expression of your ideas?
Mann-Whitney U	22843.00	22941.00	22663.00	23227.00	21576.00	22443.00	22976.00
Z	-2.181	-2.083	-2.564	-2.053	-3.568	-2.828	-2.424
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.029	.037	.010	.040	.000	.005	.015
<b>Mean Rank</b>							
Paid	<b>237.13</b>	<b>238.46</b>	<b>242.42</b>	<b>239.19</b>	<b>246.88</b>	<b>244.14</b>	<b>243.90</b>
Unpaid	214.53	215.01	213.55	216.36	208.24	212.48	215.03

a. Grouping Variable: Payment for WIL

“Was your immediate supervisor of assistance in you developing relationships with co-workers” scores for paid students (237.13) were statistically significantly higher than unpaid students (214.53),  $U= 22843$ ,  $\square= -2.181$ ,  $p= .029$ . “Did your supervisor appear interested in you as an individual” scores for paid students (238.46) were statistically significantly higher than unpaid students (215.01),  $U= 22941$ ,  $\square= -2.083$ ,  $p= .037$ . “Did your supervisor provide for adequate training” scores for paid students (242.42) were statistically significantly higher than unpaid students (213.55),  $U= 22663$ ,  $\square= -2.053$ ,  $p= .010$ . “Did your supervisor motivate you to improve yourself” scores for paid students (239.19) were statistically significantly higher than for unpaid students (216.36),  $U= 23227$ ,  $\square= -2.181$ ,  $p= .040$ . “We communicated effectively with each other” scores were statistically significantly higher for paid students (246.88) than for unpaid students (208.24),  $U= 21576$ ,  $\square= -3.568$ ,  $p= .000$ . “Did you receive adequate training in your job” scores were statistically significantly higher for paid students (244.14) than for unpaid students (212.48),  $U= 22443$ ,  $\square= -2.828$ ,  $p= .005$ . “Did the work atmosphere allow for the expression of your ideas” scores were statistically significantly higher for paid students (243.90) than for unpaid students (215.03),  $U= 22976$ ,  $\square= -2.424$ ,  $p= .015$ . These differences indicate that supervisors show a greater interest in paid WIL students than unpaid WIL students. For a company to pay a WIL student there appears to be a vested interest in the outcome of the WIL placement.

There was only one statistically significant difference between criteria score for males and females. “Did you get along with co-workers” scores were statistically significantly higher for female students (238.17) than for male students (209.94),  $U= 18368$ ,  $\square= -2.472$ ,  $p= .013$ . This could be as a result of the general make-up of employee’s gender in the tourism and hospitality industry.

**Table 5: Mann-Whitney U Test for criteria and Gender**

	V54 Did you get along with co-workers?
Mann-Whitney U	18368.000
Z	-2.472
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.013
<b>Mean Rank</b>	
Male	209.94
Female	<b>238.17</b>

a. Grouping Variable: Gender

## Conclusions

This study provides insight into the first-hand experiences of students with regard to tourism WIL. The literature underlines the importance of WIL for students’ to gain experience before graduating thereby improving marketability of students with tourism industry organisations. However the WIL experience needs to be improved in order to fulfill the requirements of stakeholders. This study provides understanding into the experiences of tourism students’ with the aim of revising the current WIL program at TUT. The results provide evidence from students’ first-hand experiences with tourism organizations and indicate that the organisation with which WIL is undertaken is vital to the performance of the WIL student.

A positive work environment has effective employees and supervisors that are attentive, understanding and interested in the performance of the student, which leads to students providing greater work value. The age of the WIL student does have an effect on the work environment and further research into the extent of this effect is required. It is also important to understand if the age of the respondent has an effect on the final evaluation by employers. Payment for WIL is a contentious issue and one that requires further research. Since



organisations are under no obligation to pay WIL students, further investigation into the performance of paid students versus non-paid students would be insightful.

### **Limitations and recommendations**

While the findings from this study indicate that most tourism students' view WIL placements positively, there are a number of limitations, which need to be reviewed and further research conducted. The scale used in the questionnaire of the WIL logbook should be updated to provide a meaningful scale by which students can effectively rate their WIL experience. The researchers propose the use of a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree and 5= strongly agree) whereby students will be asked to rate their level of agreement with various criteria related to the WIL experience. It would also be beneficial to conduct pre- and post-placement analyses of students' expectations and perceptions of the WIL experience in order to ascertain the gaps that exist in the current WIL format. Researchers suggest that a comparison of students' views and supervisors' views of WIL be conducted in order to provide in-depth analyses of the WIL experience. Furthermore, the reports analysed for the purpose of this study, include only those of students' who successfully completed WIL. There are possibly other students' who did not successfully fulfill WIL requirements or who did not find WIL placement. There is no evidence or data available for these students. It is recommended that future research include all students' registered for WIL.

Finally, all WIL reports analysed for this study included only one report per student, despite any industry placement changes during the six-month WIL period. Students' may decide to change the placement organisation during the six-month WIL period, or work in different departments within the same organisation. This information is often not recorded as part of the WIL placement experience and feedback is therefore lost. It is therefore recommended that all changes in organisation or department placements be recorded and questionnaires completed for each.

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