

# Employability development in Higher Education institutions: a tourism student perspective

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## Abstract

Tourism is the world's largest and fastest-growing industry. The South African tourism industry (TI) contributes to the creation of employment (National Department of Tourism (NDT) 2011), and the development and growth of the country's economy. Yet, the South African TI experiences a critical skills shortage. This results from the fact that many tourism graduates do not possess the skills required by the world of work. Put another way, tourism graduates are not adequately prepared for absorption in the tourism industry. This, in turn, prevents them from participating effectively in the tourism industry. As Fallows and Steven (2000) put it, the knowledge of an academic subject is no longer enough in today's challenging work environment; as such, it is important for graduates to develop skills that will increase their chances of finding employment.

In light of the above, it is imperative for higher educational institutions to include the development of employability skills in their tourism-related programmes. Hence, it becomes essential to explore ways in which higher education institutions could respond more effectively to the needs and expectations of the tourism industry in order to reduce youth unemployment in South Africa. In this regard, focus group interviews constitute the most suitable qualitative research technique to elicit valuable information on employability development, from multiple student perspectives. In other words, focus groups allow for open, flexible, and democratic discussions. The researcher took the necessary precautions to ensure the high quality and trustworthiness of the focus group interviews. By getting students together, to discuss their experiences and opinions, the researcher obtained valuable and insightful information on the development of tourism students' employability attributes.

## Key words:

Higher educational institutions, tourism industry, graduate employability



Source:[http://www.falmouth.ac.uk/sites/default/files/styles/main\\_image/public/image/your\\_creative\\_future\\_wordle.jpg](http://www.falmouth.ac.uk/sites/default/files/styles/main_image/public/image/your_creative_future_wordle.jpg)

## Introduction

The underlying forces that have recently driven transformations in higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa are unlikely to change in the near future. HEIs are facing more financial cuts, due to declining public funding (CHE, 2005; OECD, 2013). Conversely, tuition fees continue to increase; this puts more strain on students and their families (CHE, 2013). Hence, all education stakeholders, particularly students, parents, and government demand that educational institutions be more accountable and responsible towards students.

It must be stressed that students who attend higher education institutions for the first time come with a range of expectations, experiences and skills which call for new and more flexible ways of delivering higher education (Fidgeon, 2010; ILO, 2011; Morgan & Houghton, 2011; Ito, 2014). Put differently, South African HEIs are under increasing pressure to produce highly-mobile graduates who possess the necessary knowledge, skills, and attributes that make them employable in various areas of the country's economy (Cranmar, 2006; Cosser, 2011; Ito, 2014). However, in the 21st century, massification does not only mean higher student numbers, but also new educational needs and the search for new partnerships between HEIs and states that largely fund and regulate HEIs (Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Ito, 2014). Thus, governments have appealed to HEIs to play a fundamental role in developing capacity to offer greater support to students, especially first generation students – through innovative partnerships with businesses, industry, and communities, and to become more responsive to and flexible with regard to the curriculum (National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS), 2011; CHE, 2013, Ito, 2014). In addition to the aforementioned challenges, HEIs compete for the best students, top researchers, and research grants (NSDS, 2009; Tomlinson, 2013). In this context, HEIs

have become tools for the development of human capital (Clearly, Flynn, Thomasson, Alexander & McDonald, 2007). Thus, this article investigates current practices in higher education – in relation to the feedback received from students – to enhance employability development.

## What is employability development?

Employability refers to an individual's ability to gain and maintain an initial employment, and to obtain new employment, if required, within an industry (Kruss, 2004; Yorke, 2006). It must be noted that a variety of other terms can be used to mean employability, namely, key skills, core skills, life skills, soft skills, traditional intellectual skills, personal attributes, essential skills, functional skills, enterprise skills, necessary skills, behavioural skills, and transferable skills (Lowden, Hall, Elliot, Lewin, 2011). Authors also use different but equally broad expressions such as knowledge of organisations, work/employment-related skills, entrepreneurial skills, and communication skills to refer to employability (Bodem & Nedeva, 2010). Clearly, employability is a complex and multidimensional concept which is difficult to define (Rae, 2007; Jackson, 2013; Tymon, 2014). This means that there is a lack of consensus on the meaning and measurement of employability.

Chan (2012), for instance, argues that employability does not necessarily lead to successful employment. Some scholars argue that individuals have more freedom to make decisions over their careers, compared to the traditional career context in which organisations took responsibility for an employee's career (Rae, 2007; Ladkin & Weber, 2008, Tymon, 2014). This indicates that the responsibility has shifted from the company to the individual, in the new world of work. According to Fallows and Steven (2000), the knowledge of an academic subject is no longer sufficient in today's challenging work environment; thus, it becomes important for graduates to develop skills that will

increase their chances of finding employment.

Tourism is a service industry. As such, it requires graduates with a variety of employability attributes and skills. In this regard, Rae (2007) highlights the increase in the demand for graduate employability, the fact that graduates find it difficult to start their own careers, and the over-supply of graduates in a number of subject areas. He notes that this is not a new phenomenon, since graduates often enter the world of work through casual or temporary jobs that offer low rates of pay. However, tourism is a labour-intensive service industry whose perspectives on employability will now be discussed.

### **Tourism industry's perspectives on employability development**

The tourism industry is rapidly growing and is becoming a major source of employment; it produces a considerable number of jobs either directly or indirectly (NDT, 2010; OECD, 2013). Numerous opportunities exist within the tourism industry which consists of multiple, interrelated organisations (NTSS, 2011). The tourism industry, which forms part of the export sector, is an important agent of development and growth (ILO, 2011, Hanekom, 2014). A number of authors have emphasised the need for a tourism organisation to employ people who have some form of experience in the industry (Prokou, 2008; Wang, Ayres, Helen, Huyton & Jeremy, 2009; Jackson, 2013; Hanekom, 2014). The tourism industry – which is increasingly compelled to tailor its services to the needs and likes of its growing, mature clientele – also requires creative staff (Roberts, 2009; Hanekom, 2014). It is important to note that the tourism industry involves intense, face-to-face interactions, or fast, effective written communication between the various service providers and the tourists. Tourists often judge the quality of a tourism organisation's service based on their experience of the latter.

Thus, from an organisational perspective, employability contributes to the structures and processes of an organisation (Finch, Hamilton, Baldwin & Zehner, 2013). The 2013 Peoples 1st study – which focuses on the size of tourism establishments comprising predominantly of small business, training, and education (2014) – confirms that industries are becoming increasingly reluctant to invest in developing the transferable skills of graduates. This is due to economic pressures and time constraints. It suffices to note that the study reiterates tourism graduates' lack of some of the most basic skills needed for successful employment.

It must be emphasised that the tourism industry's workforce is characterised by high proportions of females, low-skilled workers, low income levels, unfavourable working hours, very limited career

opportunities, and a critical skills shortage of middle managers (Wang, et al. 2009; DoL, 2012). Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) found that employers want evidence of graduates' experience beyond academia, as well as an affirmation of their willingness to step outside comfortable and familiar situations. Employers expect graduates to be equipped with a wealth of generic skills. Finch et al., (2013) indicate that increased attention is being paid to soft skills, problem-solving, job specific functional skills, and pre-graduate experience; this has implications on the reputation of academic institutions offering tourism programmes. On his part, Tymon (2014) observes students' failure to match theory and practice, when they enter the tourism industry, with limited practical application knowledge. From his part, Rae (2007) stresses students' lack of basic social and occupational skills that should be displayed when confirming meetings, attending interview appointments, and introducing themselves.

Clearly, the limited interaction between higher education institutions and the tourism industry leads to the faulting of the

two. Indeed, higher education is accused of valuing theory and ignoring application, while the tourism industry is charged with undervaluing theory and academics in favour of practical experience (Roberts, 2009; Holmes, 2013). It becomes important to establish where the responsibility of each organisation lies. Some scholars believe that higher education institutions are not responsible for training graduates for employment positions, nor is it their role to develop employability attributes; they regard these as the responsibilities of employers (Rae, 2007). Yet, according to Kruss (2004: p.682), employers expect graduate to “hit the ground running”, with the right set of employability attributes, and prepared to become skilled workers. A number of academics strongly object to such a pressure put on higher education institutions by society (Jackson, 20013a).

### **Higher education institutions' perspective on employability**

Whether employability skills can or should be developed by higher education institutions has become a topic for debate (Tymon, 2014). Researchers have argued that many of the employability factors are theoretical and prescriptive; these researchers have stressed a lack of empirical evidence supporting current theoretical propositions about employability (Wickramasinghe and Perera, 2010). It is undeniable that there is increased pressure from the tourism industry. However, the challenge remains to establish the best way to incorporate employability attributes in the curriculum of HEIs. Despite arguments about and questionability of the correlation between employability skills development and actual employment, the sustainability of HEIs depends on good employment figures for their graduates whose future employment is subjected to the acquisition of some work experience (Tymon, 2014).

In light of the above, Wang, Ayers and Huyton (2009) underscore that tourism institutions must do much more than just reflect the immediate needs of the

workplace or their immediate demands. In a similar vein, Tribe and Airey (2005) exhort tourism education to extend its reach beyond the requirements of entry-level employment positions. On his part, Roberts (2009) emphasises the imperative for HEIs to recruit research-qualified staff. This is to address the fact that many tourism academics have limited or very recent industry experience, and limited industry engagement. All these factors hamper their ability to enhance the quality of service delivery. Here it becomes important to note that the quality of the tourism programmes offered by higher education institutions is affected by the structure and mode of service delivery.

Nonetheless, HEIs need to continue to invest in and promote employability development (Tymon, 2014). Nevada (2007) contends that the value of higher education institutions will increase significantly, if they become independent from the government and are perceived as more relevant to both the economy and society in which they are situated. Consequently, for the OECD (2013), higher education organisations' policy should have several main objectives relating to quality, access, funding, and research policies.

Eurico, Oom do Valle and Silva (2013) indicate that HEIs face additional challenges which are often measured by students' level of satisfaction with their HEIs, in terms of image, expectations, value, and loyalty. In this regard, Finch et al. (2013) stress that employability is but one of the many goals of higher education institutions, some of which strive to foster a love for lifelong learning and community engagement in tourism students. This is in response to the fact that graduate numbers have increased, due to massification and the widening of participation. These factors have led to an over-

supply of graduates who find it hard to start their careers (Rae, 2007; Finch, Hamilton, Baldwin & Zehner, 2013).

Higher education institutions' incorporation of employability development is evident. Yet, career planning and personal development provision are generally regarded as less important, and separate from the main subject or skills-based course provision (Rae, 2007). This is contrary to the demand made by both the tourism industry and government to include critical employability-related activities as an additional, compulsory section of the core academic programme. This means that employability should be regarded as a fundamental aspect of the educational process.

Strategies targeting the transition from schools to higher education institutions have long been implemented in the USA and Australia, where valuable first year experience approaches have been developed over many years (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010; Ito, 2014). Many higher education institutions have introduced seminars/workshops or programmes. The latter are designed to effectively address the gap resulting from the under-preparedness of students and massification, as well as to assist with academic language proficiency, the development of different learning approaches, and the acquisition of subject knowledge (HESA, 2009; NSDS, 2011; DHET, 2012; CHE, 2013; Lynch, 2013; Ito, 2014).

Given the multi-disciplinary nature of the tourism industry, it is critical that knowledge be formally shared between higher education and the tourism industry and, informally, among graduates, to enhance service delivery (Roberts, 2009; Fidgeon, 2010). A study conducted by Ferns (2010) shows various examples of partnerships in the form of guest lecturers who speak to students about products, challenges, and rewards in specific sectors of the tourism industry. For a number of authors, the value of partnerships lies in the fact that they afford

students the opportunity to network and interact with industry partners (Ito, 2014). Other ways of supporting students include panel discussions that take place at tourism workshops, and some joint initiatives aimed at guiding students such as open career days. As it becomes apparent, work experience comes in many forms, on or off campus. Industry exposure and practical work experience are widely acknowledged as important factors in securing future employment (Nolan, Conway, Farrell & Monks 2010; Akomaning, Voogt & Pieter, 2011; Jackson, 2013a; Tymon, 2014). Some higher education institutions do have strong partnerships and academic links with the tourism industry.

Experienced graduates are busy transforming the tourism industry (Roberts, 2009). Yet, according to the NSDS (2011), more attention should be given to opportunities for extended programmes such as bridging courses and other additional career options. Some scholars even suggest stand-alone modules designed for a professional development geared towards final year students in the undergraduate tourism qualification. These modules are expected to facilitate an increased integration of career planning and development, with the hope that students would be more prepared for their early careers (Solnet, Robinson & Cooper, 2007). Other authors suggest that tourism students be given opportunities to study abroad, or spend semesters in other higher education institutions located abroad, on an exchange programme. It is expected that students would profit from the experience of these international institutions (Boden & Nedeva, 2010).

However, according to a study conducted by Rae (2007), a number of challenges continue to hinder the integration of career development perspectives through enterprise-based learning. This may be attributed to the fact that enterprise development is not yet widely adopted by higher education institutions offering

tourism programmes. It must be noted that various policies, in Europe, emphasise the need to include entrepreneurial aspects in tourism-related study fields (Komulainen & Korhonen, 2009), to enhance self-employment or entrepreneurship. As it becomes clear, the aim of the modern tourism curriculum is to equip students with the necessary skills, attitudes, and confidence that would enable them to be

successful in life in general. A survey conducted by Sheldon, Fesenmaier, Woeber, Cooper and Antonioli (2007) identified this integration as central to higher education's ability to adapt to significant societal and industry changes. The table below presents the responses from the 16 participants in their study. The summary of the participants' views is organised into four categories.

**Table 1: a four-category summary of participants' responses**

<b>Destination Stewardship Skills</b>	<b>Political and Ethical Skills</b>
Management of real and virtual networks Knowledge sharing skills Ability to respect and work with all stakeholders Managing complex adaptive systems Environmental management skills	Ethical behaviour: demonstration and motivation Integration of basic human values into the workplace Lobbying and the ability to influence the political process
<b>Enhanced Human resource skills</b>	<b>Dynamic business skills</b>
Team building Effective listening and negotiation Motivation and leadership Working with distributed, virtual project teams Emotional intelligence	Flexibility Multitasking Critical thinking Optimal use of common sense Innovation/entrepreneurship Communication skills: using new multimedia technologies Cross-cultural competencies Risk identification, estimation, and control Avoiding problems, rather than solving them

**Source: Sheldon et al. (2007).**

The aim of Sheldon et al.'s (2007) study was to explore tourism graduates' exposure to employability development in order to understand their everyday experience. In this regard, the use of focus group interviews represents an attempt to close the gap between what graduates experience and how higher education institutions expect them to act. Given the importance of employability development, tourism graduates' feedback on this notion should play a significant role in assisting with the fostering of employability in higher education institutions offering tourism programmes. Boden and Nevada (2010) consider tourism graduates' employability development as the responsibility of higher education institutions. As such, it is essential that they establish a relationship with the labour market. According to Ferns (2010), stakeholders expect a return on investments; the government aims for a sustainable and skilled workforce; employers desire a pool of competitive

applicants from which to recruit; and graduates strive to be highly employable through the acquisition of employability attributes from higher education institutions.

### **Graduates' perspectives on employability**

Graduates recognise the value of employability skills, that is, a qualification on its own will not guarantee employment (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Tomlinson, 2008). A tourism graduate must act in ways that lead others to consider him/her worthy of being employed (Jackson, 2013a). Moreau and Leathwood (2006) argue that employability is primarily constructed in terms of an individual's skills. A graduate's attitude, his/her approach formation, and his/her labour market strategies are developed through higher education. However, these attributes are not related to knowledge,

but rather to how one perceives things in context, one's ability to go beyond the discipline, as well as one's motivation and commitment (Tomlinson, 2007; Tymon, 2014). Additional essential personal attributes include proactive personality, which relates to graduates' ability and willingness to contribute to innovation by being creative, committed to lifelong learning and the enhancement of their self-confidence, hardworking, willing to accept responsibility, and result-orientated (Tymon, 2014).

The character of young people is partially shaped during their time in higher education. Nevertheless, Jackson (2013a) found additional variations in employment trends which are due to age, attitude, the status of ethnic minorities and majorities, and the situation of people with disabilities in relation to that of those without disabilities. Tymon (2014) confirms and supports the finding of Moreau and Leathwoods' (2006) study according to which an increase in competition between graduates results from their pursuance of the same positions in the same tourism sector. Some scholars attribute this to the fact that individuals have more decision-making power over their careers now, as opposed to before: when organisations decided for their employees (Ladkin & Weber, 2008).

### **Framework for the study**

Employability is a complex notion which has a strong potential to complement tourism graduates' development in higher education institutions and to address their

shortcomings. The aim of this research is to identify the full range of issues to be addressed, as well as views and attitudes to be developed in students by higher education institutions in order to prepare graduates for the tourism industry. Hence, participants were requested to provide feedback on the development of their employability attributes after their five-month experience of the workplace, through focus group discussions.

The choice of focus groups is in line with Peterson's (2004) understanding that

qualitative research serves to broaden views and uncover issues and topics that are quantitatively considered and evaluated. Focus group discussions are also imperative in a rapidly developing and changing education environment. Hence, a focus group discussion took place at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), a public higher education institution located in Gauteng, South Africa. UJ is a comprehensive institution that offers both diploma and degree programmes in tourism. Peterson (2004) stresses that, although small qualitative samples are safely projectable to a large population, an idea expressed by one individual may impact significantly on the overall success of the study. Figures from UJ suggest that the demand for undergraduate courses in tourism is starting to decline. Therefore, this study endeavours to evaluate the employability aspects of UJ tourism programmes, from a student perspective.

### **Focus group techniques**

Substantial literature is devoted to defining and explaining the techniques related to the use of focus group interviews as a qualitative research method. Schurink (reference) describes a focus group interview as a purposive discussion of a specific topic between eight to ten individuals from a similar background and who have common interests (Schurink, Schurink and Poggenpoel in de Vos et al., 1998). The emphasis, in this discussion, is not on consensus, but rather on the diversity of opinions expressed by the individuals forming the group. Each focus

group, in this study, consisted of 10 students. Peterson (2004) emphasises the fact that each individual is free to argue, agree or disagree with the points made by others, or discuss the issues raised. It suffices to stress that the data were collected from final year undergraduate students in a comprehensive South African higher education institution. All the students involved in the research studied towards an undergraduate tourism qualification.

The power of a focus group interview, as a research tool, is evident in the increasing acknowledgement of the culture, subjective meaning, and experiences of the participating tourism students. Focus groups are highly effective and rewarding in terms of the richness and depth of the information that they provide. This is because they help to explore a broad range of attitudes and views, and generate a variety of responses through interaction. According to Peterson (2004), the major drawback of focus group interviews is the fact that some individuals tend to monopolise the discussions. This prompts the question of whether or not the views obtained are biased or prejudiced in any way. However, the goal of this study is to collect a range of views and attitudes regarding the development of employability attributes at higher education institutions.

### **Methodology**

In order to appropriately address the research question, the present study adopted a single case study approach (Yin, 2010). The participants were made aware that they were part of a focus group and that their comments and responses in the discussions would inform the findings of this study. They were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point. It is important to note that the participants were both males and females between the ages of 21 and 23, with work experience in the tourism industry, even though the focus group comprised mainly of females.

In terms of data collection, in accordance with Yin's (2010) advice, a range of data were collected from multiple sources (observations and semi-structured interviews). The data were analysed by means of a direct interpretation method, to extract the description of the process engagement by the participants in order to obtain their authentic perceptions of work experience and employability development.

The case study offers insightful information on the applicability and usability of employability development in higher education institutions. The following research questions were posed to the participants:

- 1: Why did you enrol to study tourism at UJ?
- 2: What type of employability attributes are important in the tourism industry?
- 3: How much did university support the development of your employability and how?

### **Feedback and results**

#### **Question 1: Why did you enrol to study tourism at UJ?**

Generally, the participants conveyed a positive perspective regarding their enrolment for a diploma qualification in tourism. They concurred that the tourism industry of South Africa is broad and full of opportunities, since it is still growing. The participants who were all blacks (7 female, 3 males), 70% of whom were first generation students, indicated that their main reason for enrolling for tourism was a combination of an interest in the subject and a resulting desire to learn more about tourism (60%). This question generated a variety of remarks and registered the expression of personal challenges which are summarised as follows: students' families are not familiar with tourism; they do not know the value of the industry, but they are supportive of the students. Some students were exposed to tourism at school; they come from poor communities. They hope to use tourism to change or positively influence their communities.

A large proportion of the participants (70%) indicated that they were the first in their families to enter university, which they view as a means of sustaining themselves and their families. The first quotation below clearly shows that tourism enables students to be financially independent:

*"I decided to come to the city to change my future, I thought I would get a bursary easier in the city. I*

*know the tourism industry is a dynamic industry and a competitive sector, many opportunities exist. I am currently supporting myself by doing part-time work. My family wants me to do get a job and stand on my own feet” [TG5].*

For another participant, a qualification in tourism constitutes as a life policy that will enable him/her to care for his/her siblings in the event of their mother’s death. This is evident when he/she indicates that:

*“I come from a single parent family, I will be looking after my siblings, if my mom passes a way. I have to make a success of my tourism qualification, pay my bursary loan back as quick as possible” [TG3]*

Tourism offers an escape route, a self-fulfilment opportunity and debt repayment guarantee to another student. She confides that:

*“I decided, at school level, to run away from Maths and to do Tourism as a subject. My personality is outgoing, and I like meeting new people learning new things, opportunity to travel. My determination, made sure that I enrol for something at a university, I have to proof to my family I will succeed in life – I have to pay my parents back, they are currently looking after my first born” [TG9].*

The next quote emphasises the self-sustenance opportunity and debt repayment power that tourism affords students. As the following participant advises:

*“Don’t wait for people to do some things for you, do it yourself, you will have to support yourself. Time is not on our side, we have to better*

*ourselves and pay our study fees back, it shows responsibility. I would like to continue with my post-graduate qualification” [TG4].*

Tourism seems to fulfil even students for whom it was not the first choice. As this participant indicates:

*“Tourism was my second option, I do not regret it, I am enjoying. I did not have tourism as a school*

*subject. Tourism creates opportunity to travel. Some of my friends see tourism as a waste of time; black African people only know about flying, they do not have an idea of the size of the industry. Some only think about tourism as going to destinations” [TG10].*

Having established the participants’ overwhelmingly positive view of the role of tourism in their lives, it becomes essential to probe the characteristics that a tourism student/graduate needs to possess to be employable in the tourism industry.

### **Question 2: What type of employability attributes are important in the tourism industry?**

At first, when the above question was posed, students were reluctant to answer. This suggested that they were unaware of the concept ‘employability’ and did not understand the meaning of ‘employability development’. Consequently, clarification questions were posed and examples were provided to enlighten the group. Then, the initial question became clear to the students who now grasped the meaning of employability development and the complexity of employability. As a result of this clarification, students painted a clearer picture of employability which they associated with the application of the skills and knowledge acquired at university in the workplace. The focus group mentioned a variety of skills that constitute employability. However, some students clearly distinguished between employability and personal attributes.

Participants concurred that it was necessary for tourism graduates to possess a variety of employability skills. In no particular order, they mentioned

*communication skills, negotiation skills, teamwork, accuracy, listening skills, problem-solving skills, critical thinking, research skills, planning and organising skills, time management skills, self-management skills, demonstration of knowledge about a variety of products, and ability to work without close supervision. The interviewed students*

discussed the particular employability skills that they have been exposed to during their internship in the tourism industry. Many participants emphasised age, ethnicity, and religion; whereas one stressed attitude, motivation, and willingness to learn, as key employability skills.

Commenting on the benefits of employability development or in-service learning, one participant indicated that:

*"The exposure provided me with more than just knowledge, and working with people in service industry. It is about work ethics, how to present yourself in front of clients, how to sell yourself during the interview process, how to talk when going for the interview, how to act at the interview" [TG3].*

Another participant highlighted the multidimensionality of employability development and its role in the shaping of the tourism graduate's character. This is evident when he/she characterises employability in terms of:

*"Having a set of skills that are required to do a job, communication, through telephone and or email, formal letters documentation to guide travel decisions and confirmations." Fellow staff members looked their attention on me, and my work. I had to be particular focus and attention on me and my work; I had to handle criticism and feedback well. I felt that it is important; it will help me in my future positions. At first I was extremely scared, but now I am excited at times anxious but I know I do have the capabilities to succeed in the tourism industry. I have been*

*exposed to a variety of departments. I am willing to work hard, learn as much as I can with my eyes and ears. I have the desire to excel in everything I do, and everything I do are key attributes to being successful" [TG 5].*

One student underscored the role of employability development in fostering communication, problem-solving abilities, and creativity. He/she regards the following as the most important employability skills:

*"... communication, how you speak to clients, your body language, how you deal with problems, how you have innovative ideas to overcome the problem – how to think out of the box" [TG1].*

Internship provided an opportunity for self-discovery. One student realised that she has the ability to:

*"... work under pressure, I had to use my time at the office effectively, juggling of a variety of tasks all at once was a challenge. We work with people from different backgrounds and had to demonstrate good networking skills, and employee relations, sometimes without supervision. I learned to ask questions seeing that accuracy is very important, we cannot make a mistake" [TG7].*

Another student corroborated the self-discovery aspect and emphasised the networking opportunity. This is evident when she indicated that employability development programme gave her:

*"The opportunities to meet new clients, stay calm and I discovered that I can talk to older people, I do have interpersonal skills, I have an outgoing personality. I am young and have a good attitude towards the supervisor. I am now motivated to stay in the industry, but maybe explore another sector" [TG2].*

She added that:

*"One requires a great degree of interpersonal, management skills and leadership skills, I even had to supervise fellow staff members that*

*have been working in my section for a longer period than me" [TG2].*

It needs to be noted that some students participated in this study on a voluntary basis, to assist with open school marketing days and open school events.

As such, they had to interact with adults and prospective students in relation to subject knowledge and student life. Thus, one student confided that

*"I learned by doing small extramural activities, I learn more from others and myself" [TG4].*

Lastly, some participants stressed that employability extends beyond the programmes and qualifications offered by higher education institutions. This is evident when this participant indicates that:

*"It not just about what we have learned at UJ, it is more than just a qualification, it is finally about me, I can make a difference through the skills here at UJ to excel in the workplace and now that I will determine my future" [TG5].*

The next quote foregrounds the complementarity between the university and the tourism industry in ensuring the development of tourism graduates' employability skills. Reflecting on the benefits of in-service learning, the following participant notes that:

*"I learned a great deal on how to address emails to clients, you just cannot start with Hallo, it is totally different to what I know... I still learn daily, even though we learned this, I did not practice it, I do have a better understanding now" [TG6].*

But in-service learning also presents challenges, notably those related to language. In this regard, one participant observes that "I had to speak to people in Afrikaans, eish, it was difficult [TG10] there is truly a different culture" [TG 8].

Nevertheless, the participants noted that employability skills development opportunities were multifaceted, challenging, but enriching:

*We were exposed to voluntary community work, in the office and supported a variety of projects, charity, cycling (Comrades) we had to package products for the event, had to speak to people in a social*

*environment young and old . I never thought that this would be part of my day to day, and I learned how to speak to community members, be creative, flexible and come up with innovative ideas, to make these projects unique. I already have extra ideas for next year, and truly do hope the company will employ me full-time. [TG9]*

The participants recognise that, thanks to the in-service learning experience, they have now been exposed to other religions, cultures, various social problems, ethical values and norms, and lifelong learning.

### **Q3: How much did university support the development of your employability and how?**

Lengthy discussions took place about how the university prepares students. The discussions began with the contextualisation of learning contents and modules, before addressing the application of employability. During one of the focus group discussions, one student highlighted that:

*"The fact that we had a practical work component in our qualification gave me the exposure and I learned so many things about myself, and was able to reflect on my modules learned. During our qualification we had to work in groups, being a team player getting to know different personalities and working with different cultural groups, we found that some are unreliable, and have a tendency to do things at the last minute, and we learned that we cannot wait until the last minute. Opportunities were created in the class room for us to explore and to engage in. We know how to work under pressure; we had to multitask, to do many things during our studies, study for different modules,*

*do assignments, have group discussions, group work, work on case studies, and study for a variety of tests. In between we also had to*

*socialise, and do part-time work to pay for my studies*" [TG 2].

This quote emphasises the role of group assignments, given to students at university, in the development of their employability.

Furthermore, students indicated that, for the duration of their qualification (three years), they were exposed to a variety of industry guest speakers who spoke about a variety of tourism products, and how these products are packaged and tailor-made for the specific market. The participants also noted that previous tourism graduates' feedback on the challenges and trends identified in the industry, as well as their interaction with peers and first years, broaden their scope and knowledge of the tourism industry. In addition, industry guest specialists provided students with product knowledge, and allowed students to discuss other industry matters [TG2, 7, 5, 8, 9].

In relation to exposure to a variety of guest speakers, during his/her studies, one participant confides that:

"I thought that there will be no future for me, this is due to the poor work characteristics of this industry, but being exposed, I now realise that there is a variety of opportunities" [TG3].

Another participant indicates that:

"I enjoyed the industry guest lecturers, now I can apply and relate to product development, relationships with fellow colleagues, trends and challenges, especially in the events industry, seeing that I do have an interest in this sector" [TG3].

The multifaceted character of the initiatives aimed at developing graduates' employability is highlighted by one student who indicates that:

We were exposed to workshops and career planning, and we learned about how to compile a CV, Job

hunting skills, and interview skills. Reflecting on who I am and where I am heading was very good for me,

taught me a lot about the working world in reality, we are all competing amongst ourselves for tourism positions. I have been choked into realising how important it is to get a work placement [TG6, 7].

However, the following quote suggests that the initiatives and programmes organised by the university to develop students' employability skills are not sufficient:

"I think we received good training, but I battled, I couldn't operate Excel. It was intimidating being asked to do something, and then I don't even now anything about the programme. I think if UJ could expose us to that it would be very good" [TG3].

This is concurred by two other students who emphasise that:

"We only received MS Word, that is not enough, we need more than that" TG10]

And:

*"We dealt with power point during my work, we had to do presentations during a variety of modules, that truly assisted me with my presentation work, I still need to learn a great deal, we received great feedback at school and the training helped us not to make the same mistakes in the workplace some concurred [TG9, 3].*

The next quote suggests that the university cannot be expected to provide students with all the training that develop all the employability skills that they would need, graduates have to take some responsibility. This is implied in the following student's indication that:

"UJ taught me independence – try and solve my problems first before checking with a supervisor" [TG6].

This view is in contrast with those of a number of participants who think that the university needs to do more for them. The one student notes that:

"We had to work on Amadeus, I did not have money to pay for the

course when offered at UJ, I think if we could have it as part of the

qualification it would be better” [TG7].

Other students confirmed that they had worked on Galileo [TG4], Quicktrav [TG5], Travelport [TG3], as well as on an in-house system – whose name he/she does not know – and Excel. However, they believe that they truly need to be trained on a GDS, CRS system because it is essential [TG1]. Nevertheless, the comprehensive briefing of students in key areas by the university facilitates their practical experience. In this regard, a participant indicates that:

*“During my orientation we dealt with HR policies practices, sick leave, working hours, BEE Scorecards, HIV/Aids, community upliftment programmes, work pressure, ethics, things I was exposed to theoretically, but now I do understand the practical implications of this all, and can relate to the issues. Our company even had a dietician, psychologies, seeing that we work long hours in a stressful environment” [TG10].*

Another student partly supported the view that the university consents considerable efforts to develop graduates’ employability skills, but would have appreciated the development of his/her self-employment skills. As the student contrasts:

*“We received details on work allocation, how to approach our work, the importance of accuracy, our stipend and dress code. I would have liked to have been exposed to entrepreneurial skills, I would like to start my own business, I do feel reluctant, I don’t want to make a mistake, I would have liked more guidance in that field” [TG9].*

Some students mentioned that the employability skills development opportunities provided by the university enabled them to engage with other students from different race groups:

*I have multi-cultural friend, I learned more about their values, beliefs, cultural differences religious*

*background, I am more sensitive to them and I believe that it assisted me and I know more about human values in the world of work.” [TG1, 6, 7].*

Clearly, the employability skills development initiatives implemented by the University of Johannesburg also have personal benefits for the students.

## Conclusion

It is clear that many of the students who participated in the study have benefited from the work experience organised by their higher education institution, namely, UJ. The focus group discussions reveal that these young graduates do take responsibility for their own learning. A small number of students indicated that they are willing to pursue postgraduate studies; however, lack of funding prevents them from doing so immediately. They would like to, first, settle the considerable debts that they have accrued. Conversely, a bigger proportion of students indicated that they would like to enrol in other shorter courses, and would like to continue to learn in the field of tourism to complement their current knowledge of this industry.

Many students expressed the pressure that they had to work under, and the multitasking demands of their daily work. Nevertheless, they emphasised that they remained motivated and committed to becoming successful. Most of the students involved in the study indicated that they experienced the complementary relationship between their qualification programme and the employability skills development initiatives positively. Some participants explicitly highlighted the theoretical content of their programmes and clearly articulated its practical application in the tourism industry.

The abovementioned achievement of the UJ tourism programme reflects the view that the emerging HEIs outlines a new landscape that is digital in nature. This new landscape serves entrepreneurial

learners, and allows them to design their own educational path, based on the goals

they want to achieve. However, this digital landscape may or may not involve a period of study. That is, students will set their own pace, and will continue to learn until they master various skills and competencies (DUP, 2014). It must be emphasised that individual learning plays a major role in tourism graduates' development of employability skills (Cevera-Taulet & Ruiz-Molina, 2008).

Therefore, employability should be viewed as a combination of graduates' education – from traditional diplomas/degrees earned to alternative certificates – and corporate trainings that they completed. However, such a view of employability can pose challenges to the structures and systems of higher education institutions (Rae, 2007; CHE, 2013).

In clearer terms, higher education in South Africa will be forced to provide better online resources and to adapt its qualifications to accommodate part-time and online students. Failure to do so may lead to these public contact institutions being supplanted by private HEIs or the world wide web. Higher education institutions that have not achieved the reputation of 'world-leading' will have to adapt and grow to prove that they can teach effectively in a digital age, in order to retain students. The question that remains to be answered relates to how employability attributes will be incorporated in this digital age.

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