African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure 2025, Vol. 14 No. 5 pp. 999-1006
ISSN: 2223-814X

A Qualitative Analysis on the Effects of the Disney Cultural Exchange Programme on Hospitality and Tourism Education at Namibia University of Science and Technology

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Abstract

This study examines the effects of the Disney Cultural Exchange Programme on Hospitality and Tourism education at Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST), focusing on how the decade-long collaboration impacts students' educational and professional development. A qualitative research design was employed, using surveys with fifteen NUST students and five faculty members, and semi-structured interviews with five Disney programme representatives to collect and analyse data regarding participant experiences. Findings reveal that the programme offers a multicultural living and working environment, emphasizing cultural exploration alongside professional and personal growth. Students gain practical hospitality and tourism experience through internships at Disney Parks and Resort Hotels and can pursue professional development short courses at Walt Disney College. The programme fosters real-world customer service skills and intercultural immersion, enabling participants to build lifelong friendships and advance global careers. The study highlights experiential learning as a crucial approach to enhancing graduate employability, promoting global citizenship, and strengthening ties between educational institutions and the hospitality industry to meet evolving economic demands. This research contributes valuable insights into the role of international cultural exchange programmes in transforming hospitality and tourism education through immersive industry partnerships, preparing students for the globalized workforce within tourism and hospitality sectors.

Keywords: Hospitality and tourism education; cultural exchange programmes; industry partnerships; experience driven; customer service

How to cite this article: Cloete, G., Kuwa, E.T., Tjitunga, U., Haufiku-Makhubela, P. & Shiyandja, H. (2025). A Qualitative Analysis on the Effects of the Disney Cultural Exchange Programme on Hospitality and Tourism Education at Namibia University of Science and Technology. African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 14(5):999-1006. DOI: https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720.686

Introduction

In today's competitive global labour market, a university degree alone is increasingly insufficient for securing meaningful employment. The rising number of graduates has diminished the distinctiveness of academic qualifications, prompting employers to prioritise additional employability skills such as communication, problem-solving, and teamwork. In response, universities worldwide are internationalising their curricula to boost graduate competitiveness (Fragouli, 2020). Cultural exchange programmes have emerged as effective tools for developing intercultural competencies and improving employability outcomes. Research indicates that approximately 90% of participants report improved cross-cultural understanding (Norris & Gillespie, 2009), while exchange students demonstrate a 35% increase in tolerance and openness compared to non-participants (Braskamp, 2009). Furthermore, 85% gain heightened global awareness and a nuanced understanding of international issues. Longitudinal studies show that 70% of former exchange students maintain lasting professional networks that support academic and career growth. Participation in such programmes is also linked to a 20% greater likelihood of pursuing international careers, attributed to enhanced adaptability, communication, and cultural fluency (Norris & Gillespie, 2009; Sisavath, 2021). International student exchange programs, through immersive cultural and professional experiences, play a pivotal role in academic, professional, and personal development (Murphy, 2018). They also contribute to broader goals like sustainable development, aligning with (National Planning Commission of Namibia, 2025). In this context, the Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST) has collaborated with the Disney Cultural Exchange Program for over a decade, aiming to expose Hospitality and Tourism students to global industry standards. Despite increased participation, there is limited understanding of the specific skills gained, challenges faced, and the impact on local curricula. This qualitative study explores the educational and professional outcomes of the Disney exchange for Namibian students, highlighting experiential learning, skill acquisition, and curriculum relevance, while contributing to the broader literature on international exchange in higher education.

Literature review

Cultural exchange programmes in higher education

Cultural exchange in higher education encompasses structured initiatives designed to facilitate students' engagement in academic, professional, and intercultural experiences beyond their home countries. These programmes aim to foster mutual understanding, promote international academic collaboration, and support personal development by immersing students in

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diverse cultural and educational contexts (Abdullah, 2024). Cultural exchange programmes in higher education enable students to engage in academic, professional, and intercultural experiences abroad, promoting mutual understanding, international collaboration, and personal growth (Abdullah, 2024). These initiatives vary in form and duration, including student exchanges lasting one or two semesters with credit transfers (Almeida et al., 2016). Moreover, Gutiérrez-Pulido et al. (2025) highlight that international internships offer valuable opportunities for students to gain practical professional experience in multicultural environments, enhancing not only their career development but also their intercultural competence. Other programme types include summer schools and intercultural workshops, which provide short-term, intensive learning experiences focused on global citizenship, intercultural communication, and pressing global issues such as sustainability and human rights. Collectively, these models contribute to academic enrichment, skill acquisition, and cultural awareness by exposing participants to varied pedagogical approaches, disciplinary perspectives, and cultural practices (Fragouli, 2020).

Notable international initiatives exemplify the effective implementation of cultural exchange within higher education. The European Union's Erasmus+ Program is a key example, facilitating mobility among students, faculty, and institutions across Europe and associated partner countries, thereby advancing the internationalisation of higher education (European Commission, 2021). Another prominent example is the Disney Cultural International Exchange Program, administered by Disney University in the United States. Established in 1982, this programme encompasses the Cultural Representative Program (CRP) and the Cultural Exchange Program (CEP), operating across over 31 countries as indicated in Table 1. The CRP, which includes participants from 25 countries primarily in Africa and Europe, utilises the Q-1 Cultural Exchange Visa (commonly referred to as the "Disney Visa") to enable individuals to engage in cultural representation roles at Walt Disney World Resort in Orlando. Conversely, the CEP, which operates under the J-1 Cultural Exchange Visa and involves participants from six countries, emphasizes monthly cultural participation beyond employment duties. Both programs serve as instruments of cultural diplomacy, with the CRP particularly focusing on cultural storytelling through employment in roles designed to reflect participants' national identities (Walt Disney Parks and Resorts U.S., Inc., 2024).

Table 1: Summary of participating countries in the CRP and CEP Programmes

Cultural Representation Programmes (CRP)	Cultural Exchange Programmes (CEP)
Canada, China, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Morocco, Norway, and the United Kingdom **Three Southeast Asian countries:** India, Indonesia, and Thailand **Twelve Sub-Saharan African countries:** Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe	Canada France Germany Italy Norway United Kingdom

Source: Adapted from Walt Disney Parks and Resorts U.S. Inc (2024)

Maistry (2020) provides an in-depth exploration of CRP participants' experiences and motivations through surveys and interviews. Both key drivers identified include personal development, curiosity about other cultures, and future career prospects. Both the CRP and CEP incorporate comprehensive training and orientation through Disney University to ensure alignment with Disney's organizational culture and service standards. These are supplemented by peer learning opportunities and residential support structures specifically designed for international participants (Walt Disney Parks and Resorts U.S., Inc., 2024). Despite their longevity and reach, academic research on these programmes remains sparse. The CRP has been the subject of limited scholarly investigation, while the CEP lacks peer-reviewed studies altogether. Notably, there is an absence of longitudinal research examining the programmes' long-term impact on participants' career trajectories, intercultural competencies, and comparative outcomes across countries and program types. This highlights a critical gap in the literature and a need for further empirical inquiry. Despite the gap in literature and statistics, this study focuses on revealing the benefits and challenges of the CRP towards NUST.

Cultural exchange programmes in Hospitality and Tourism education, particularly those grounded in academic-industry partnerships, offer significant advantages. Atef (2025) emphasised that these include enhanced graduate employability, access to high-quality internships and job placements, and enriched pedagogical practices such as guest lectures and practitioner involvement. These collaborations support experiential learning, equipping students with both technical and soft skills in real-world environments, ultimately fostering more workplace-ready graduates.

Work-integrated learning in the hospitality and tourism industry

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) serves as a crucial link between theoretical instruction and practical experience, enhancing student employability and confidence. Jackson (2014) describes WIL as a mechanism for applying academic knowledge in professional settings, thereby improving job readiness. Kokt & Solomons (2022) further emphasised that WIL boosts motivation, confidence, and satisfaction by immersing students in authentic workplace environments. International internships and cultural exchanges are especially effective in developing essential soft skills, with Hermann (2025) highlighting adaptability and intercultural communication, as well as technical competencies such as event management. Macionis & Walters (2024) add that experiential learning through methods like case studies and simulations strengthens critical thinking and problem-solving skills, which are indispensable for navigating the complexities of the modern hospitality sector. Graduate employability is greatly improved by international exposure, with employers valuing cultural sensitivity, resilience, and teamwork in diverse settings (Van Mol et al., 2024). In developing regions, employability depends on strong work-integrated learning (WIL) programmes and academic-industry partnerships, which are often limited by resources and weak collaboration (Ntshangase et al., 2022). As the hospitality sector globalises, graduates must develop global competencies like multilingualism, digital literacy, and adaptability to meet evolving demands (Digital Promise, 2022). The industry's digital transformation and

focus on sustainability also require leadership and advanced technical skills, making WIL and international experience essential for producing industry-ready graduates (Razack et al., 2025).

The hospitality and tourism sector's rapid evolution necessitates curricula that are dynamic, industry-aligned, and responsive to employer needs. Strong academic-industry partnerships are essential for bridging the gap between theoretical frameworks and practical industry demands. Cloete & Ndlovu (2023) emphasize that these collaborations enable the co-creation of educational programmes that adhere to global standards while addressing local workforce needs. This alignment ensures that graduates are well-equipped to navigate both domestic and international tourism landscapes. Busulwa et al. (2024) argue that integrating digital business and transformation capabilities into hospitality and tourism curricula is essential for preparing graduates to meet the technological demands of the modern industry. In Namibia, institutions like NUST offer basic work-integrated learning; however, they lack training in digital and tourism technologies (Cloete & Ndlovu, 2023). The Disney Cultural Exchange Program helps bridge this gap by exposing students to global industry standards, though mismatches remain in digital skills and communication, as noted in other developing regions (Thapa, 2018). Namibian curricula have been criticized for not adequately preparing graduates for industry demands. The Namibia Training Authority's Skills Development Plan II (2022–2026) highlights a gap between training provision and the practical, digital, and soft-skill competencies required by the labour market. International internships play a crucial role in cultivating soft skills, such as global competence, critical thinking, problem-solving, cross-cultural communication, and adaptability, particularly in contexts where local opportunities are limited (Gosling, 2023). Globally, tourism education must emphasize sustainability, ICT skills, and adaptability, yet many African institutions still face challenges aligning education with industry needs, resulting in ongoing skill mismatches (Lukose & Agbeyangi, 2024; Fernández-Villarán et al., 2024).

The global higher education landscape has seen significant changes in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Cultural exchange programmes are evolving to include virtual models that increase inclusivity and reduce costs. Virtual exchanges, such as collaborative online international learning (COIL), allow students to engage with global peers through digital platforms, expanding access to a more diverse student population (O'Dowd, 2021). In addition, exchange programmes are increasingly integrating interdisciplinary learning approaches, tackling global issues like climate change, migration, and social justice through problem-based learning models. To improve accessibility and equity, institutions are adopting targeted outreach initiatives, offering more scholarships, and forming partnerships with underrepresented regions. These efforts aim to diversify programme participation and enhance the transformative impact of exchange experiences. Academic-industry collaboration aims to equip students with both technical and soft skills valued by employers, such as communication, critical thinking, and teamwork (Khan et al., 2025; Komsu, 2024). Curricula that emphasize workplace-relevant skills like operations management, customer service, and intercultural communication better prepare students for the dynamic tourism industry (Adeyinka-Ojo et al., 2020). Adaptability and self-awareness are vital as professionals face rapid global changes. The NUST-Disney Cultural Exchange exemplifies effective experiential learning by providing exposure to international best practices and mentorship. In the growing Southern African tourism sector, responsive educational programmes are crucial for workforce development (Atef, 2025). Overall, strong academic-industry partnerships improve curriculum relevance, graduate employability, and global competitiveness, but require ongoing evaluation and strategic, sustainable implementation.

Challenges of cultural exchange programmes

Although international student exchange programmes offer numerous academic, professional, and personal development benefits, the challenges encountered by participating students and institutions warrant careful consideration. As Apusigah (2019) notes, while these programmes significantly enhance personal growth and career readiness, they are not without complexities. The challenges can be broadly categorized into three key areas: student-related obstacles, institutional and systemic barriers, and issues concerning intercultural and social integration. Understanding these challenges is essential to improving the effectiveness, inclusivity, and overall impact of cultural exchange initiatives. One of the major difficulties students face is insufficient preparatory training for their roles during internships or exchange programs. As highlighted by Cloete and Ndlovu (2023), many students enter the workforce without adequate orientation to workplace expectations or familiarity with essential technological systems such as Galileo and Amadeus. These shortcomings can hinder their performance during internships and complicate their transition into full-time employment. Language barriers remain one of the most prominent challenges for students participating in international exchange programmes. Suryanto et al. (2022) note that adapting to a new language, especially when English is not commonly spoken at the host destination, can significantly affect students' learning and social interaction. Tanasy et al. (2024) further explain that students often struggle with cultural disorientation and unfamiliar pedagogical approaches, which can impede their academic engagement and performance. Similarly, Theerasak & Pookkaman (2023) report that cultural adjustment, unfamiliar traditions, and communication difficulties frequently lead to feelings of isolation and stress. Another critical barrier for exchange students is adapting to the host country's academic system. Many students are concerned that studying abroad might disrupt their academic progression, especially in rigidly structured degree programmes where flexibility is limited. Al-Othmani (2025) notes that unfamiliar academic systems, difficulties in transferring credits, and differences in instructional and assessment methods add to the students' academic burden, further discouraging participation.

Financial limitations are a significant obstacle to effective participation in exchange programmes. According to Abed & Alani (2020), many students are deterred by the high costs associated with tuition, travel, accommodation, and daily expenses. Al-Othmani (2025) adds that while scholarships and financial aid options exist, they are frequently underutilized due to complicated application procedures, poor promotion, or restrictive eligibility criteria. These economic barriers are

particularly burdensome for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In addition to economic difficulties, many students face personal and familial responsibilities that make studying abroad challenging. Al-Othmani (2025) explains that caregiving roles, emotional support duties, and concerns about leaving family behind are particularly common among first-generation university students. These responsibilities often outweigh the perceived benefits of international exchange, discouraging students from pursuing such opportunities. Institutions also face challenges, particularly regarding the alignment between academic training and industry needs. Franklin et al. (2023) emphasise that many curricula fail to include sustainability-focused competencies, revealing a disconnect between academic offerings and the evolving priorities of the job market. This misalignment is especially problematic in fast-changing industries and highlights the need for more collaborative and adaptive curriculum design between academia and industry stakeholders. A lack of effective communication from institutions further complicates the success of exchange programmes. Al-Othmani (2025) points out that many students remain unaware of available opportunities due to inadequate information dissemination. Additionally, complex administrative procedures, bureaucratic delays, and difficulties in obtaining course approvals or visas often discourage students from completing the application process. In developing regions, such as many Southern African countries, academic institutions face added constraints. Smaller institutions often struggle with limited funding, insufficient access to international partnerships, and weak industry linkages. These challenges make it more difficult to establish and maintain effective exchange programmes, further reducing opportunities for students in these contexts.

Students frequently encounter challenges related to social integration. For example, Theerasak & Pookkaman (2023) highlight how cultural adjustment issues can lead to isolation, especially when students face discrimination or political tensions. A notable example includes mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong, who reported experiencing difficulties with language, social interactions, and political differences. Despite these difficulties, students often strive to connect with peers from different cultural backgrounds. In a qualitative case study, Yusup & Gemiharto (2022) found that while students made active efforts to engage across cultures, language remained a significant barrier. Even when a common language was spoken, variations in dialect often led to misunderstandings, as identical words could carry different meanings in different cultural contexts.

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research design, aiming to explore and interpret the subsistent experiences, perceptions, and educational outcomes of participants involved in the Disney Cultural Exchange Programme (DCEP). The qualitative approach is most appropriate for this study as it enables an in-depth understanding of how international exchange experiences shape personal and professional development, as well as their impact on hospitality and tourism education at NUST. The exploratory and interpretive nature of qualitative research allows the researchers to capture rich perspectives, focusing on feelings and emotions, whereas quantitative methods may have overlooked. This notion was supported by O'Dowd (2021) and confirmed by McKay et al. (2022). A purposive sampling method was employed to select participants with direct involvement in the Disney Cultural Exchange Programme. This selective sampling is also a non-probability sampling approach that ensured the study targeted individuals who could provide meaningful insights into the topic at hand, as confirmed by Salendab & Laguda (2023). The sample consisted of three distinct groups: Fifteen NUST Hospitality and Tourism students or alumni who have participated in the Disney Cultural Exchange Programme between 2010 and 2025. Five academic staff members from the NUST Department of Hospitality and Tourism, particularly those involved in curriculum development and facilitation, programme coordination, or student mentoring related to the Disney Cultural Exchange Programme and Work Integrated learning. Three Disney Programme coordinators, also representatives involved in overseeing or facilitating the student exchange partnership with NUST. Participants were identified through institutional records, snowball sampling, and referrals from faculty and staff in the Department of Hospitality and Tourism. Data was collected using surveys and interviews, allowing for open-ended responses that reflect participants' authentic experiences and viewpoints. Interview guides were tailored made and maintained a common thematic structure to ensure consistency in data collection while allowing for flexibility in the discussion. The semi-structured surveys sent via email were used primarily with the Disney Cultural Exchange Programme for the students/interns and NUST academic staff members to allow them to share detailed narratives of their experiences, challenges, benefits, and insights without being constrained by forced and inflexible questioning. The semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face with the Disney representative programme coordinators to explore the alignment of the Disney Cultural Exchange Programme with curriculum goals, observed student outcomes, and institutional impacts. The data for the study were analysed using the thematic analysis of Braun & Clarke (2022), focusing on familiarization with the data through the repeated reading of transcripts based on the research objectives. Themes were then generated and named reflecting the essence of each thematic cluster. This was followed by creating thematic categories and grouping similar codes under each category, as indicated in Figure 1. Eventually, the production of the final reports followed, integrating themes with direct quotes to substantiate findings. Perplexity and Chat GPT were used to assist in coding and organizing the qualitative data. Interview questions and discussions revolved around the following key thematic areas. Below follows the generated themes as illustrated in Figure 1:

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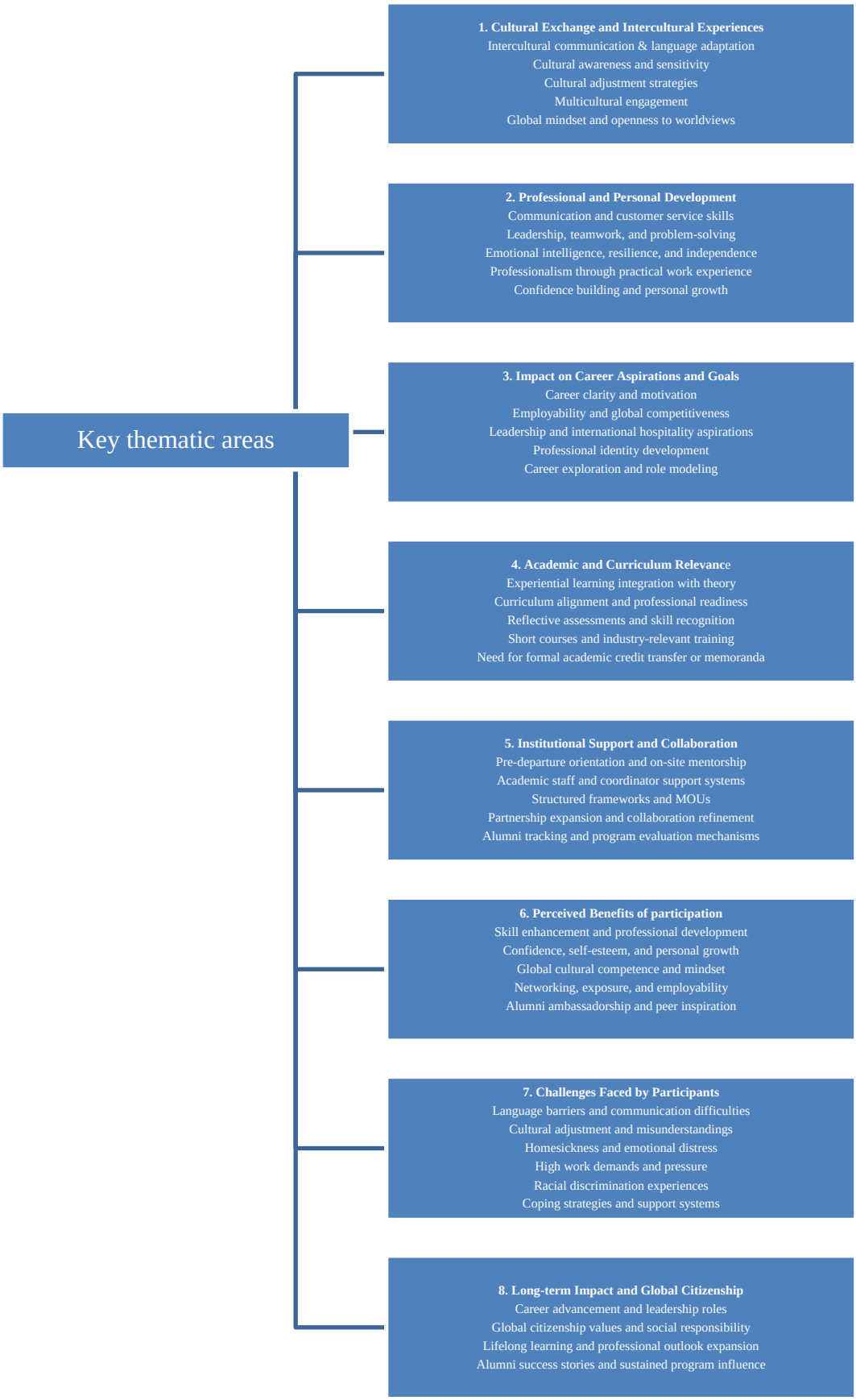

Figure 1: Key thematic areas

Findings and discussions

This section presents the discussion and findings from an analysis of qualitative data gathered from students, alumni, and academic staff at NUST who have engaged with the DCEP. The DCEP represents a strategic partnership between NUST and

Disney World, providing Hospitality and Tourism students with experiential learning opportunities abroad. The program aims to foster both professional growth and intercultural competence, bridging academic learning with global industry exposure. To assess the educational and professional impact of the programme, qualitative data were collected through surveys with participating students, NUST alumni, NUST academic staff, and through interviews with Disney programme coordinators. The analysis revealed key themes that reflect participants' intercultural experiences, skill acquisition, personal and professional development, curriculum relevance, and long-term career aspirations. The findings also underscore the benefits and complexities of international industry-academic exchange programmes within the tourism and hospitality sector. The following eight core themes were identified through thematic analysis, aligned with the research objectives of evaluating the programme's impact and its alignment with academic and industry expectations:

- Cultural exchange and intercultural experience
- Professional and personal development outcomes
- Impact on career aspirations and goals
- Academic and curriculum relevance
- Institutional support and collaboration
- Perceived benefits of participation
- Challenges faced by participants
- Long-term impact and Global citizenship

These themes offer in-depth insights into how the DCEP contributes to the holistic development of students and informs broader conversations on curriculum development, industry readiness, and international collaboration in higher education. The DCEP demonstrates a comprehensive impact on NUST students' professional growth and intercultural competence by providing authentic experiential learning within a global industry context. Participants consistently reported the value of cultural exchange as an eye-opening experience that exposed them to diverse perspectives, work styles, and communication practices. This finding reflects literature that emphasizes how cultural immersion improves cultural sensitivity, adaptability, and interpersonal communication, essential skills for global hospitality careers (Jackson, 2014; Kokt & Solomons, 2022). The program's strategies, such as shared multicultural housing and instructor-led cultural classes, allowed for meaningful intercultural bonding and dialogue, aligning with best practices in fostering intercultural competence through peer interaction and structured reflection (Cloete & Ndlovu, 2023; O'Dowd, 2018). Despite its benefits, participants encountered challenges, including language barriers, stereotyping, and occasional cultural misunderstandings, which compelled the development of patience and respect for cultural differences. Support mechanisms such as on-site social workers, alumni mentorship, and pre-departure orientations were crucial in mitigating adjustment challenges, consistent with findings that highlight the importance of preparatory and ongoing support in international exchange programs (Al-Othmani, 2025; Franklin, 2023). These supports collectively contributed to participants' enhanced confidence, maturity, and intercultural awareness upon program completion, underscoring the program's role in nurturing globally engaged graduates.

The professional and personal development outcomes of the DCEP are substantiated by participants' reports of improved emotional intelligence, leadership capabilities, and financial literacy. Exposure to Disney's world-class hospitality environment enabled students to gain workplace-relevant soft skills such as professionalism, time management, and resilience competencies recognized as critical in hospitality and tourism education literature (Macionis & Walters, 2024; Yang et al., 2021). The informal nature of assessment through reflective essays and attendance certificates, as highlighted by Hamadziripi & Daniels (2023), suggests a need for standardized frameworks to systematically capture and validate these developmental gains, a recognized gap in work-integrated learning scholarship. Career impact emerges as a prominent theme, with many participants articulating clarified and elevated professional ambitions fuelled by international experience and industry exposure. By working directly with a global customer base and engaging in teamwork activities, students acquired practical skills in communication, customer service, and conflict management, placing them at a competitive advantage in job markets increasingly valuing international exposure and global competence (Ntshangase et al., 2022). Nevertheless, integration of these experiences into formal curricula at NUST remains inconsistent and informal, reflecting broader systemic challenges in aligning academic programs with rapidly evolving industry needs (Thapa, 2018; Fernández-Villarán et al., 2024). Academically, the DCEP complements theoretical learning through experiential knowledge, academic mentorship, and guest lectures by industry experts. However, the lack of formal accreditation or a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Disney and NUST limits structured curriculum integration and academic recognition. Calls from academic staff for formalized program-based modules align with literature advocating dynamic curricula responsive to industry standards and global competencies (Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism, 2020). Strengthening institutional collaboration through formal agreements could enhance quality assurance and support sustained program development.

Institutional support, including visa guidance, orientation, and mentorship, plays a critical role in participant adjustment and success. The collaborative partnership between NUST and Disney, though informal, enables valuable knowledge exchange and networking opportunities. Hamadziripi & Daniels (2023) argues that such academic-industry partnerships are vital for bridging gaps between classroom learning and workforce demands, a point reinforced by Atef (2025), who highlights their role in fostering employability and global competitiveness. Participants overwhelmingly perceived the long-term benefits of the DCEP, with Philips (2023) noting outcomes such as increased confidence, intercultural tolerance, and global mindsets, while Lukose & Agbeyangi (2024) emphasize the programme's role in fostering lifelong learning and responsible global citizenship. Alumni's contributions to institutional culture and their career advancement further reinforce

the transformative impact of such international experiences. However, the absence of formal alumni tracking and impact evaluation constitutes a limitation to fully capitalizing on the program's long-term potential. Challenges remain significant, with language and communication difficulties, financial constraints, homesickness, and academic adjustment difficulties often imposing barriers to full participation and success, as Abed & Alani (2020) highlight. Similar challenges are documented by Suryanto et al. (2022), who emphasize language barriers and cultural disorientation as key obstacles for international students, while Al-Othmani (2025) notes the compounded effects of financial and academic adjustments on student engagement and outcomes. The program's success in addressing these through comprehensive support underscores the necessity of intentional, multi-layered support structures for international experiential learning.

Recommendations

The recommendations emphasize strengthening academic integration by developing short courses that incorporate experiential learning from the Disney Cultural Exchange Programme (DCEP), formalizing collaboration through a Memorandum of Understanding, and establishing standardized assessment frameworks to validate student development. Institutional support should be enhanced via expanded pre-departure orientations, continuous mentorship, and on-site wellness resources in partnership with Disney. To improve accessibility and inclusivity, financial aid, scholarships, part-time work options, and flexible participation pathways like shorter or virtual exchanges are advised. Professional development can be fostered through industry-led workshops, career portfolio maintenance, and alignment of graduate employability attributes with the programme. Alumni involvement should be increased via formal tracking systems, peer mentorship, and feedback loops to refine the programme. Deepening academic-industry collaboration through joint research, knowledge exchange events, and positioning DCEP as a flagship initiative will enhance NUST's global profile. Lastly, challenges such as intercultural barriers, psychosocial support needs, and financial management require strategic interventions, including intercultural communication workshops, counselling services, peer support, and financial literacy training to optimize student success.

Conclusion

The conclusion of the research on the Disney Cultural Exchange Programme (DCEP) at Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST) underscores the programme's effectiveness in integrating cultural exchange, professional development, and academic learning within hospitality and tourism education. It highlights the significant contributions to students' professional growth, intercultural competence, and global career readiness through authentic experiential learning. Participants develop enhanced cultural sensitivity, emotional intelligence, leadership skills, and employability, despite challenges like language barriers and financial constraints. The conclusion stresses the importance of formalizing curriculum integration, assessment frameworks, and institutional collaboration to maximize the programme's benefits. It advocates for stronger academic-industry partnerships, expanded student support systems, and improved accessibility. Overall, the DCEP is presented as a leading example of how cultural exchange programs can produce globally engaged, industry-ready graduates, addressing existing gaps in hospitality and tourism education in Namibia. The study recommends sustained efforts to institutionalize and broaden such experiential learning initiatives to enhance their long-term impact on students and the hospitality industry.

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