



Perception of tourism graduates and the tourism industry on the important knowledge and skills required in the tourism industry

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Abstract

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are under increasing pressure to equip graduates with the necessary knowledge, skills, and attributes that would make them employable and highly versatile in various tourism sectors. This means that the various qualifications in tourism that are awarded by HEIs should reflect the tourism industry's needs and expectations. Consequently, it is important to identify the kind of knowledge skills that need to be developed in tourism graduates to prepare them for the working world. The purpose of this article is to identify the perceptions of tourism graduates and the tourism industry on the important knowledge and skills required in the tourism industry. The research adopted a sequential explanatory mixed method, which entailed combining quantitative and qualitative methods. However the findings, both from the quantitative and qualitative phases highlight the important knowledge and skills required. In terms of important knowledge and skill, both parties seem to be at par in their perception. The study found that the most important knowledge and skills required in the tourism industry are customer service/awareness, ethical conduct at work, verbal communication, acceptance of responsibility, attention to detail, ability to work under pressure, time management skills, and motivation. Significant differences existed between the perceptions of tourism graduates and those of the tourism industry regarding professional, operational, knowledge and skills attributes. However, no significant differences existed between the perceptions of tourism graduates and those of the tourism industry regarding personality traits. This paper is hopefully useful for the development of important knowledge and skills required in the tourism industry. As such it has meaning for higher education institutions that offer tourism qualifications as well as the tourism industry who employs tourism graduates. This paper is original, as the study contributes to the body of knowledge and skills required in the tourism industry since no other paper as far as could be assessed, has taken up the topic of the perception of tourism graduates and the tourism industry on the important knowledge and skills required in the tourism industry in South Africa.

Key words: Important knowledge and skills, tourism industry, graduates, employability

Introduction

Tourism is the world's largest service-driven industry and fastest-growing industry. The tourism industry (TI) contributes to the creation of employment (National Department of Tourism (NDT), 2017) and is an important contributor to development and growth in South Africa. Currently, one in 22 employed individuals in South Africa is working in the tourism industry (StatsSA, 2014). This is a positive outlook, given that this country's official unemployment rate had increased to 25.60% (StatsSA, 2013). Graduate unemployment in South Africa is a particularly compelling issue, which calls for an evaluation of the current relationship between higher education institutions, the graduates they produce and the tourism industry, which is expected to absorb those graduates (Hanekom, 2015). The tourism industry



(TI) contributes to the creation of employment (National Department of Tourism (NDT), 2017) and is an important contributor to development and growth in South Africa. Currently, one in 22 employed individuals in South Africa is working in the tourism industry (StatsSA, 2014). This is a positive outlook, given that this country's official unemployment rate had increased to 25.60% in the second quarter of 2013 (StatsSA, 2013). The ever-increasing unemployment rate, the deepening poverty and the widening inequality are mainly associated with unemployed youth, between 18 - 35 years of age (Jones, 2011). Hence, it is imperative to identify the important knowledge and skills required in the tourism industry. The tourism industry requires that increased attention need to be paid not only to the quality of tourism services and products, but also to the quality of its human resources. Human resources constitute one of the most important components of the tourism industry, since it is essentially about people which is customer driven. Staff working in the industry are clearly central to the innovative development and effective operation within the industry.

Thus, from a socioeconomic perspective, employment creation remains one of the greatest challenges facing South Africa and the rest of the world (Altman, 2013). Unemployment results from insufficient economic growth; however, economic growth alone will not ensure job creation (International Labour Organisation (ILO), ILO, 2011; NDT, 2011; OECD, 2015). Government and the private sector are expected to play a critical role in reducing unemployment and underemployment and stimulating enterprise development. Graduate unemployment in South Africa is a particularly compelling issue, which calls for an evaluation of the current relationship between higher education institutions, the graduates they produce, and the tourism industry, which is expected to absorb those graduates (Hanekom, 2015). Hence, it is imperative to explore the types of knowledge and skills required within the tourism industry and approaches through which higher education institutions (HEIs) can effectively respond to the expectations and needs of the country and reduce youth unemployment in South Africa. Therefore, it is argued that understanding the mismatch between graduates' skills and the tourism industry's needs is key to graduate employment in South Africa.

Statement of the research problem

The tourism industry is known for its inability to attract, develop, and retain quality employees (OECD, 2015). Tourism is a labour-intensive, people-centred, and seasonal industry that provides services to tourists. It is simultaneously complimented and criticised for its effect on employment in the industry. It seems that a gap exists between what HEIs are producing in terms of graduate employability. A gap also exists in terms of the perception of tourism graduates of themselves and how the tourism industry perceives and evaluates them. Employers in the tourism industry have voiced their concerns regarding graduates' lack of the right knowledge, skills, and other employability attributes.

Many debates about graduates' employability and the necessary qualifications that would secure them a position within the tourism industry have emerged. Therefore, it is important to understand this gap. Graduates' perception of themselves with regard to employability, in most cases, seem not to be in alignment with industry's perception, evaluation, and expectations. Graduates believe that employment is the automatic consequence of obtaining a qualification in tourism. However, most graduates soon realise that they do not possess the right set of knowledge and skills or the experience required to ensure employment or promotion in the tourism industry. Against this background, the next section outlines the research questions.



Research questions

The above statement led to the following research questions

- What are tourism graduates' perceptions of the important knowledge and skills required in the tourism industry?
- What is the tourism industry's perception of the important knowledge and skills required in the tourism industry?

Objective of the research

The main objective of the research is:

- To identify the tourism graduates' perception on the important knowledge and skills required in the tourism industry;
- To establish the perception of the tourism industry on the important knowledge and skills required in the tourism industry;

Literature review

The literature review of this paper is contained in the sections and sub-sections below.

The tourism industry

According to the ILO (2010), a variety of more career opportunities are available in the tourism environment than in other economic sectors owing to the constant growth of tourists, either domestically or internationally, greater individual disposable income, fewer working hours, higher educational levels, rapid and dispersed economic development and major technological advances. This is due to the nature of the tourism environment, its strong international affiliation and the existence of transnational tourism enterprises that transform peoples' lives in South Africa (Hanekom, 2014; Page & O'Connell, 2014). Like any other industry, tourism regularly undergoes frequent changes caused by external influence. Although tourism is a much-talked-about phenomenon, it is often poorly understood and stigmatised (WTO, 1983).

As an activity of modern society that is very dependent on the global economy, the emphasis has always been on the economic benefits and all the good things that tourism can bring to communities in poor countries (SAT, 2012; People1st, 2013; Hanekom, 2015). Tourism is commonly referred to as an economic saviour, the engine of national growth, the effective way to address inherited economic inequalities and sectorial imbalances in regional development. Tourism is considered as a creator of direct, indirect and induced employment and a collector of much-needed foreign exchange (WTTC, 2011; Page & O'Connell, 2014). Generally, tourism is commonly perceived as a type of "*super industry*" that can change a country and all its people's lives for the better, with a single stroke of magic (Ivanovic, Khunou, Pawson, Reynish, Tseane, 2009: 10).

The two main characteristics of the tourism industry is that capital investment requirements are low and, secondly, it is labour-intensive and falls into the financial capability, education level and unemployment rate of any developing country (Luka, 2015). As developing countries rush into tourism development to solve their pressing socio-economic problems, tourism is developed on an ad hoc basis without proper or prior planning and due consideration for their communities' well-being. Once mastered, tourism can brings more benefits than costs to the communities who engages in tourism (Nieman, Visser & van Wyk, 2008). Failure to master it leads to empty government coffers, the depletion of irreplaceable resources, a broken



traditional social structure, a lost community's cultural identity, and unemployment, underpaying jobs, economic dependency and increased debt.

Knowledge and skills required in the tourism industry

Knowledge of an academic subject field is no longer adequate in today's perplexing world of work; it is more important for graduates to develop skills that will increase their chances of finding employment (Fallows & Steven, 2000). Knowledge refers to factual or theoretical information that a student possesses in a particular content area. Knowledge is generally regarded as the first determining factor in the execution of a task. Knowing how to complete a task is a pre-requisite for developing a skill in a particular area. However, performance is not always guaranteed, since students do not always have the necessary expertise (Littlejohn & Watson, 2004; Maher & Graves, 2007; Hind, Moss & McKellan, 2007). Conversely, a skill is defined as a person's ability to apply knowledge to complete a specified task or to show a particular behaviour. This application of knowledge becomes less conscious, that is, with time and practice, a student becomes capable of demonstrating skills without constantly thinking about the knowledge that underlies them (Lather, Garg & Vikas, 2014). Skills represent the second-level determining factor, as the individual builds on knowledge (Hind et al., 2007). Other employability skills are personal qualities of an individual, such as motives, traits, self-concept, attitude, and values. Increasingly, these employability attributes are becoming key to advancing in a field (Harvey, 2000). It is critical to note that employability attributes are more intrinsic to the individual than the first two levels, namely knowledge and skills, which are linked to a qualification. This means that a qualification alone will not secure a graduate employment within the tourism industry. Thus, it is crucial to identify the types of knowledge, skills, and other employability attributes required by the tourism industry, and to compare these with those that graduates possess (Cranmer, 2006; Rigby, Wood, Clark-Murphy, Daly, Dixon, Kavanagh, Leveson, Petocz, Thomas & Vu, 2010).

The employability landscape is becoming more complicated, hence the imperative to equip students with employability skills while they are still studying so as to bridge the gap between higher education and the world of work (Lowden, Hall, Elliot, & Lewin, 2011). Mayer and Graves (2007) emphasised the need to know more about the profile of graduates in order to establish their chances of securing sustainable employment. Employability is a form of empowerment and the key to job security (Pruijt & Derogee, 2010). Employability is a set of achievements that increases the probability that graduates will secure and sustain employment (Pool & Sewell, 2007; Yorke & Knight, 2007; Marock, 2008; Martinsson & Olsson, 2008). In the present study, employability is defined as a range of knowledge and skills and other individual attributes that increases the likelihood of a tourism graduate securing employment and being successful in the industry. The following section is a discussion of human resource development within the tourism industry.

Human resource development within the tourism industry

The tourism industry is characterised by high labour intensity, instability of employment, and high levels of labour turnover. The tourism industry absorbs unskilled and semi-skills worked depending on the nature of the job. Weak internal labour consist, and thus relates to poor training, with pay differentiations and different promotion criteria's. There is a strong female gender base with low status of employment. An overwhelming portion of the tourism industry is constituted by SMMEs. Jolliffe and Farnsworth (2003), Littlejohn and Watson (2004), Liu and Wall (2006), ILO (2010) and Jackson (2014) observe that this presents a challenge for new products and service delivery in a domain where the quality of service plays a vital role. Yet poor conditions of employment exist and low levels of unionisation. The next section



elaborates more on the types of graduates within higher education institutions and the world of work.

Types of graduates

The massification of HEIs and the widening of access to systems contribute to a growing student diversity and an increase in the number of graduates. Li and Miller (2013) observe that HEIs have given rise to the perception of over-educated workers, due to frictions in the job search process and occupational fields. Additionally, the world of work has changed dramatically over the years, due to increased governmental policy and institutional pressure on HEIs to compel them to widen access. Hence, the profile and size of the student body have transformed (HESA, 2009). Graduates are more attracted to jobs in large, established organisations with a global footprint than too small to medium companies (Li & Miller, 2013). Hjalager (2003) confirms that employment at a well-known company is more likely to indicate success on a graduate's CV than the name of a relatively small and unfamiliar company.

Purcell, Wilton and Elias (2007) remark that lifelong learning includes further enlargement of the HE system with different types of short learning programmes that will ensure the continued enrolment of mature students in different courses. Families have to bear the increasing cost of mature at HE, as the value of a degree becomes more relevant. It suffices to note that many of these students tend to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Purcell et al., 2007). Purcell et al. (2007) indicate that mature graduates have greater difficulty obtaining employment than their younger peers, as well as lower returns on occupation and financial compensation. Purcell et al. (2007) add that mature graduates often offer the work environment precisely what it requires, namely, a strong work ethic, more work experience, evidence of a wide variety of transferable skills such as time management, flexibility, more stability, adaptability and commitment. Holmes (2013: 549) supports the view that graduates' skills "*relate strongly to issues of social positioning*". He examines different perspectives on employability, namely, the "*possessive, positional and processual*" approaches of graduates. The possessive approach is based on the notions of skills, attributes that direct policy, and practices (Holmes, 2013).

Employers often relate employability to new graduates' work readiness or their possession of the essential knowledge, skills, attributes, and attitudes that would ensure that, once employed, they would be able to contribute to management's objectives (Mason, Williams, Cranmer, 2009). However, a positional approach, as suggested by Holmes (2013), supports the view that graduates' skills are strongly linked to their social positioning, although graduates' actual experience is influenced by the labour market. Tomlinson (2007) highlighted the subjective dimension of individuals' perceptions and understanding of the work environment. He also mentioned the types of attitudes, dispositions, and identities that graduates develop in relation to employability and their future work. Various HEIs have made an effort to embed skills in their curricula (Fidgeon, 2010; Coetzee, 2012; Rosenberg, Heimler & Morote, 2012; Holmes, 2013). The following discussion elaborates on employability.

Employability

Employers often relate "*employability*" to new graduates' "*work readiness*" or their possession of the essential knowledge, skills, that would ensure that once employed they would be able to contribute to organisational objectives (Mason et al., 2009). Graduates not only develop their own individual profiles and credentials, but also advance specific skills and attitudes that constitute appropriate market strategies (Tomlinson, 2007; Ito, 2014). The combinations of



factors that influence graduates are unique. Some factors are noticeable in advance, whereas others are concealed and may only develop during studies or when graduates are employed. Graduates react to the same factors differently, depending on their experiences. Zehrer and Mossenlechner (2009) as well as Dhiman (2012) confirm that tourism establishments are looking for a more flexible, adaptable workforce with the right set of skills.

As for *graduate performance*, it relates to the ability to deliver results. Performance consists in the demonstration of skills and intellect in the world of work (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2010). Thus, it is associated with graduates' capability to learn quickly and effectively or their ability to develop and deliver skills that are appropriate for the position by graduates (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2010). Performance skills, according to Hinchliffe and Jolly (2010), relate to employers who express assurance in graduates' ability to take various skills gained from HEIs and apply them in their new work environment. Some employability skills have been identified as interpersonal skills, written communication skills, experience of the work environment, IT and language skills, commercial or awareness of the business environment, numeracy skills and presentation skills (Luka, 2015). However, the emphasis placed on these skills differs, depending on employers, regions, size of organisations and the industry sector. In other words, the emphasis will reflect the diverse nature of an individual organisation, its structure, products on offer and its ethos (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2010). *Engagement* is another type of graduate identity that is defined as the ability to meet social challenges upfront and to be "outward looking". Employers construe engagement by graduates as having a broader perspective (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2010: 580). Engagement entails tenement in work experience, volunteering in local and or international communities of practice (social, work-based and or in virtual communities). Put differently, it is about stepping outside the familiar or one's comfort zone to make the most of the student involvement and show some evidence of preparedness.

The Confederation of the British Industry (CBI) (2009) suggests that a positive attitude is a key foundation that can be summarised as a "can-do" approach, the willingness to participate, support and advance new innovative approaches (CBI, 2009: 35). The same accounts for a positive attitude, self-motivation, self-evaluation and self-management. According to Universum (2014), graduates' top ten preferences are to seek professional training and development; to secure opportunities to establish leadership skills; to work with leaders who will support their development; to obtain good references for future positions; to secure employment; to achieve respect; to be part of a dynamic and creative work environment; to secure sponsorship for future education; to abide by ethical standards; and to operate in a friendly work environment. However, equal attention should be paid to problem-solving, ethical standards, professionalism and the identification of operational problems.

However, for Hinchliffe and Jolly (2010), graduate identity cannot be a sequence of skills and attributes that can simply be ticked off. Identity is subject to contestation, as it is socially constructed and negotiated and is therefore fragile (Holmes, 2006: 9). It may occur that a graduate's identity is projected unrecognisably, or is not totally recognised by the tourism industry. Identity is developed by social and economic processes that fluctuate (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2010). Domina and Luka (2014) contend that a certain set of skills should correspond to the industry requirements globally.

The combination of the set of skills depends on both the occupation field and the experience. Zehrer and Mossenlechner (2009) highlight that many attempts have been made to characterise employability. Literature seems to reveal shortcomings, owing to the fact that the functional list of employability might have elements of choice. The tourism industry seems to approach employability from different perspectives, given the variety of sectors and focuses (Jackson, 2013). The following section discusses graduates' perceptions of the tourism industry.



Data analysis and discussion of finding

This section discuss the findings by comparing and contrasting how tourism graduates' and the tourism industry perceived the important knowledge and skills required in the tourism industry: Existing literature reflects on how tourism graduates rated their perceived ability to use their knowledge and skills on the job. In terms of the gender of tourism graduates, Table 1, shows that women comprises 70% of the sample, while men accounted for 30% of the tourism graduates. The gender composition of the tourism industry respondents show that the sample comprised 76.5% women and 23.5%. Thus, it could be assumed that the South African tourism industry is dominated by females. When reflecting on the demographic composition of tourism graduate population group, the majority of graduates were black African, which is roughly representative of the South African population. The demographic composition of the tourism industry respondents in terms of the population group reveals that 27.4% of the respondents were black African, and 57.3% more than half where white.

Table 1: Demographical information of respondents

GENDER	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percentage
Tourism Graduates			Tourism Industry	
Female	145	70.0	237	67.5
Male	62	30.0	114	32.5
POPULATION GROUP	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percentage
Tourism Graduates			Tourism Industry	
Black African	160	77.7	95	27.4
White	23	23.0	199	57.3
Coloured	13	6.3	26	7.5
Indian	9	4.4	24	6.9
Other	1	0.5	3	0.9

This finding is consistent with that of Kusluvan and Kusluvan (2000) who reported that females perceive their personalities to be more compatible with working in the tourism industry. Furthermore, the study revealed that the majority of tourism graduate respondents were African. This tends to reflect the ratio of the South African population. However, it was found that a substantial number of white females worked in the tourism industry more than initially conceived. The study also found that the tourism industry supports the advancement of women in the workplace. This is in line with research conducted by the DEAT (1996), Rogerson (2005) and Hjalalger (2003). However, it appears that the tourism industry has not yet overcome its gender and racial divides, which were highlighted by previous studies (NDT, 2011; UNWTO, 2014, NDT, 2017). Although legislation has endeavoured to create an enabling environment, through the White Paper (1996) and other Acts, it is clear that the tourism industry is not transforming at a fast enough pace. This seems in line with the views that discrimination and unequal opportunities still persist within the tourism industry (Choudhury & McIntosh., 2013; OECD, 2015) and that transformation appears to be slow (NDT, 2011). However, some literature suggests that tourism enterprises are addressing the legacy of the apartheid-based discrimination against black businesses, considering that white females dominate the tourism industry (NDT, 2011; UNWTO, 2014). However, it appears that, in recent times, the tourism industry has made efforts to promote women's empowerment (ILO, 2010; UNWTO, 2014, NDT, 2017).

With regard to how tourism graduates and the tourism industry respondents perceived important knowledge and skills, divergent perspectives emanated from the data analysis, as reflected in Table 2, below.



Table 2: Important knowledge and skills required in the tourism industry

Ranking	TOURISM GRADUATE			TOURISM INDUSTRY		
	Important knowledge and skills required in the tourism industry, as perceived by tourism graduates'	Means	SD	Important knowledge and skills required in the tourism industry, as perceived by tourism industry	Means	SD
1	Ethical conduct at work	4.78	0.471	Customer services/awareness	4.77	0.447
2	Customer service/awareness	4.77	0.507	Ethical conduct at work	4.73	0.512
3	Verbal communication	4.77	0.465	Verbal communication	4.69	0.517
4	Time management	4.71	0.580	Acceptance of responsibility	4.68	0.504
5	Ability to work under pressure	4.70	0.519	Attention to detail	4.65	0.536
6	Acceptance of responsibility	4.70	0.537	Ability to work under pressure	4.65	0.546
7	Attention to detail	4.68	0.546	Integrity	4.64	0.532
8	Professional appearance	4.67	0.531	Time management	4.62	0.579
9	Motivation	4.67	0.522	Written/business communication	4.52	0.627
10	Flexibility	4.60	0.615	Motivation	4.49	0.590

Table 2 reveals the top ten perceived important knowledge and skills required in the tourism industry according to the ranking of the tourism graduates and the tourism industry respondents. High mean values were observed for both groups, and there was considerable agreement.

The most important knowledge and skill identified by the industry respondents was *Customer services/awareness*, whereas tourism graduates identified *Ethical conduct at work*. Second for industry respondents was *Ethical conduct at work*, while tourism graduates ranked *Customer service/awareness* in this position. Thus, overall, the industry respondents and tourism graduates agreed on the two most important aspects. These results are consistent with the findings of studies that identified communication, management of relationships, and work ethic as the three most important skills in the tourism industry (Wang, Ayers & Huyton, 2009). In third place, the industry respondents and tourism graduates both indicated *Verbal communication*. This result is congruent with the data obtained by Zwane, du Plessis and Slabbert (2014), which confirmed that a career in tourism requires good communication skills. The industry respondents rated *Acceptance of responsibility* fourth, whereas the tourism graduates ranked *Time management* in this position. It could mean that if graduates are able to accept responsibility, the industry will trust them, which will allow graduates to progress in their careers. The industry respondents ranked *Attention to detail* fifth, whereas the tourism graduates ranked *Ability to work under pressure* in this position.

In sixth place, the industry respondents ranked *Ability to work under pressure*, while the tourism graduates ranked *Acceptance of responsibility* in this position. The industry respondents ranked *Integrity* seventh, and the tourism graduates ranked *Attention to detail* seventh. In eighth position of importance, the industry respondents ranked *Time management*, whereas and the tourism graduates indicated *Professional appearance*. Industry respondents ranked *Written/Business communication* in ninth position, where the graduates identified *Motivation*. The industry respondents ranked *Motivation* tenth, while tourism graduates ranked *Flexibility* in this position.



The findings demonstrate that tourism graduates and the tourism industry respondents agreed on eight of the top ten important knowledge and skills similarly, namely *Ethical conduct at work*, *Customer service/awareness*, *Verbal communication*, *Time management*, *Ability to work under pressure*, *Acceptance of responsibility*, *Attention to detail*, and *Motivation*. However, their rankings were not in the same order, except for *Verbal communication*. These results are in accordance with those of Wang et al. (2009) study, which indicated that oral communication is the most important skill in the tourism industry.

In addition, the industry respondents perceived *Integrity* and *Written/business communication* as important knowledge and skills in the tourism industry. Tourism graduates added *Professional appearance* and *Flexibility* in their top ten skills. The ranking shows that there is no significant difference in the perceptions of tourism graduates and the tourism industry regarding the important knowledge and skills required in the tourism industry. The next section provides possible reasons for the rankings.

As discussed previously, the most important skill, as perceived by the industry respondents, was *Customer services/awareness*. However, tourism graduates perceived the most important knowledge and skill, as reflected in Table 2, as *Ethical conduct at work*. It is indeed essential to have such important knowledge and skills in a service-orientated environment that sells tourism products and services that are intangible (Page & O'Connell, 2014). It is the foundation of excellence in the tourism industry, since the industry flourishes because of exceptional customer experiences. The provision of high-quality service and ethical conduct at work are no longer choices, but have become necessities within the tourism industry, particularly in South Africa (UNWTO, 2010). Any indication of poor service delivery and unethical conduct towards clients may result in distrust in a tourism firm, and could eventually lead to a loss of clients. This assertion complements Hanekom's (2014) observation that services of a high quality are crucial for the development of tourism industry professionals and graduates.

According to Coetzee (2010), demonstrating ethical conduct at work implies that graduates accept full responsibility for their positions and roles. This could also reflect that the industry requires trustworthy graduates who have effective work habits, in order to build and grow a reputable organisation. Therefore, both tourism graduates and the industry, though they ranked the various types of knowledge and skills differently, acknowledged that customer services/awareness and ethical conduct at work are not just beneficial to one's career and working environment, but also contribute to the long-term sustainability of tourism organisations.

Both respondent groups perceived *Verbal communication* as the third important knowledge and skill required in the tourism industry. While the mean score for the tourism graduates, was 4.77 that of the industry respondents was 4.69, which is a sign that there was no significant difference between their perceptions of this skill. Clearly, a high number of respondents from both sides agreed that verbal communication skills are important in the tourism industry. Good communication enables one to function effectively in the industry (Zwane et al., 2014). Employees should be able to communicate effectively with customers, be comfortable when providing information about tourism products and services, and convince prospective customers to purchase tourism products (Hanekom, 2014). Graduates have come to realise that they have to interpret customers' information, communicate with and guide them regarding new products and services, and convince them to undertake travels.

From the tourism industry's perspective, the fourth important type of knowledge and skill was *Acceptance of responsibility*, while tourism graduates placed *Time management* in this position. The tourism industry seeks graduates who take responsibility for completing tasks (Roberts, 2009). Taking responsibility is central in the tourism industry, as employees are



expected to attend to customers who have high expectations of their service delivery (Riley & Szivas, 2009; Hanekom, 2014). Once graduates are able to take responsibility for their actions at work, the tourism industry will have full confidence in and trust them, which will enable them to progress in their careers (Hanekom, 2014).

Attention to detail was perceived by the tourism industry respondents as the fifth most important knowledge and skill to possess. Attention to detail is an important attribute that graduates need to be able to have when working in a stressful, service-driven tourism environment. Attention to detail is important because tourism employees often work with a variety of customers with multiple activities that relate to different time schedules, travel experiences, and finances, which, if not managed correctly, could have an adverse effect on customers' tour experience (Roberts, 2009; Hanekom, 2014). The graduate respondents ranked *Ability to work under pressure* in fifth position. Wang et al. (2009) observed that the tourism industry greatly values operational skills such as ethics, customer service skills, attention to detail, and adaptability at work.

Ability to work under pressure was the sixth type of important knowledge and skill identified by the tourism industry respondents. This ability is important because customers' demands which require one to perform several tasks daily. This is congruent with the view expressed by one of the participants during the interview, who noted:

"graduates work with demanding customers under tight time constraints" (TIP1).

One academic participant confirmed:

"the tourism industry consists of multiple administrative functions" (AP2).

This is in line with the applied nature of the tourism industry (Roberts, 2009). This was confirmed by Kusluvan and Kusluvan (2000), who noted that graduates complained that working long hours prevented them from leading a 'normal' life. Richardson (2008) reiterated that it is difficult for graduates to maintain a normal lifestyle, owing to the industry's long hours. The tourism graduates ranked *Acceptance of responsibility* sixth.

The industry respondents identified *Integrity* as the seventh important skill in the industry. Tourism graduates did not regard this amongst their ten important skills. Integrity is deemed important in the tourism industry, as it requires graduates to be honest and trustworthy. Tourism graduates ranked *Attention to detail* seventh.

The tourism industry respondents ranked *Time management* as the eighth type of important knowledge and skill to have in the tourism industry, while tourism graduates identified *Professional appearance*. The industry requires graduates to manage their time efficiently, because several tasks have to be completed daily. Delivering services and completing tasks within a specific period is an indication of efficiency (Roberts, 2009). Planning and organising lead to good self-management, and have a direct impact on time management (Board of Studies New South Wales, 2013).

One industry participant noted:

"Graduates lack time management skills as they have to plan and organise their day and I think that some of the graduates cannot multitask once they have been given the work to complete on their own" (TIP4).

Another participant stated that, although tourism graduates learn to multi-task during their study periods at HEIs,

"they can only apply this effectively once in the workplace" (AP2).



One graduate participant noted:

"I had a problem with response time and client requests, emails and turnaround time. I did not know how to deal with pressure" (TGP4).

One academic participant (AP4) emphasised:

"Tasks should relate back to the exit level outcome and students should become more involved with actual day-to-day tasks. Graduates should not perform menial tasks whilst in the work environment, but rather be exposed to a variety of functional areas together with a mentor that guides and assists."

Graduate respondents placed *Written/business communication* in ninth position. This skill is important because employees liaise with customers on various products and services, confirm customers' schedules, and issue travel documents. Hinchliffe and Jolly (2010) observed that the importance of written/business communication skills differs depending on the employer, region, size of the organisation, and the specific tourism industry sector. In other words, the emphasis placed on written/business communication will depend on the nature of the organisation, its structure, ethos, as well as the tourism products and services offered (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2010). The tourism industry, being a service industry with intangible products, requires employees to have writing and communication skills to complete forms and other documents that are essential components of travel processes (Page & O'Connell, 2014).

Motivation was ranked tenth by the industry respondents. Studies have shown that a motivated person will provide quality products and services to customers, leading to customer satisfaction. In this regard, an industry participant confirmed that it is important to employ *"motivated, young graduates who are responsible and willing to go the extra mile"* (TIP3). Important knowledge and skills that the tourism graduates identified in their top ten, which the industry respondents did not, were *Professional appearance* and *Flexibility*. It appears that professional appearance is important to graduates, since they represent the image of the tourism organisation and deal with customers on a personal level.

Another participant noted that graduates' dress *"fit their lifestyles but not the company's image"* (TI2).

Important knowledge and skills are attributes that employees must possess, and which assist with the recruitment, training, and development of staff. Important knowledge and skills provide the basis for curriculum- and programme development, help to identify areas where educational expertise is needed, and underpin the curriculum in tourism qualifications. The findings of the current study are consistent with those of a study by Wang et al. (2009), which identified some important knowledge and skills that are valued by the industry, namely customer services/awareness, ethical conduct at work, verbal communication, acceptance of responsibility, and attention to detail.

Limitations of the study

The data do not mirror the views of tourism graduates' who are unemployed. Hence, it is advisable that future research incorporate more graduates', especially those who are unemployed and liaise with higher education institutions, to investigate possible reasons for the non-portrayal of important knowledge, skills and employability attributes.



Recommendations

The researcher believes that if the correct knowledge and skills, are acquired in HEIs and through work integrated learning, graduates' employability will certainly improve. The following recommendations are made:

It is recommended that the development of important knowledge and skills begin at high school level. Schools should provide training in a variety of employability skills, career guidance, or assistance, as well as curricula that support the various disciplines and creates a connection to HEIs and the world of work. Students should be encouraged and supported to complete their schooling fully equipped with the skills that would enable them to find work more easily. In this regard, tourism should be marketed as a career of choice for young people, rather than a mere means to obtain a qualification.

The curricula of HEIs should not merely focus on knowledge. HEIs should also include the development of skills and employability attributes. This should narrow the gap between graduates' skills sets and employers' expectations. The DHET should compel HEIs to include more employability attributes in tourism qualifications, to prepare graduates with these attributes, which will assist them to secure employment in the workplace. More aspects of the workplace need to be built into curricula.

Practical exposure should be implemented from first-year level in various forms. A culture that builds and promotes important knowledge and skills needs to be established. This could include exposure to guest lecturers and career-guidance workshops about the various tourism sectors. Field trips during the students' second year of study, followed by six months of practical work experience (active learning, relevant volunteer work, and international student exchange programmes), are recommended. Higher education should introduce a compulsory work integrated learning component into all tourism qualifications. Alternatively, higher education should expose students to some form of assessed practical work experience. HEIs should be pro-active in forming positive, multi-level, innovative partnerships with the tourism industry.

It has become imperative for academics to develop alternative approaches to employability development through education and training. Career guidance would be necessary for tourism graduates, as the tourism industry consists of various tourism sectors offering various positions. Teaching and learning could be structured differently, to enhance employability skills. Various important skills could be embedded in a qualification, so that students can be assessed on these. Important knowledge and skills should be assessed, and marks should be assigned, in addition to the evaluation of students' theoretical knowledge.

Organisations the tourism industry should strive to fully understand the scope, relevance, and importance of the training that students receive from various public and private tertiary establishments and TVETs. The tourism industry should establish closer working relationships with HEIs that have well-established graduate recruitment programmes. The government should also assist with awareness programmes on the benefits of tourism as critical player in the economy. For instance, instead of presenting tourism as being merely a lifestyle, the government should promote a view of tourism as a suitable career option. An enhanced tourism culture should also be established by working together in formulating policies that encourage the creation of decent jobs and a culture that supports the growth of the tourism industry.

The tourism industry recognises the importance of practical work in increasing graduates' ability to secure employment. This requires tourism-related industries to minimise the barriers encountered by graduates and to encourage an increased absorption of tourism graduates.



The industry could source funds from the NSDS, the CATHSSETA, and also the DoL. The skills development levy should be made more readily available, with less red-tape. This would help to support graduates for the duration of their practical work, learnerships and in fostering required skills acquisition.

Conclusion

Prior to this research, as far as can be ascertained, there was a lack of literature illustrating the skills-based requirements for new graduates into the South Africa's tourism industry. Indeed, this study was undertaken in an effort to enlighten tourism graduates on the right set of knowledge, skills required to function effectively within the tourism industry. The study found that the knowledge and skills graduates perceive as important for the industry are not strongly aligned with the tourism industry's perspective. All the elements of knowledge and skills listed in the questionnaire were noted as important by both the tourism industry respondents and the graduates. Eight important knowledge and skills attributes ranked important by the industry respondents were ranked the same by the tourism graduates, although these were ranked differently. The elements were customer service/awareness, ethical conduct at work, verbal communication, acceptance of responsibility, attention to detail, ability to work under pressure, time management, and motivation. Graduates should take ownership of their career aspirations, and increase their knowledge and skills base through the acquisition of experience on the job, coupled with life-long learning. The contribution of the current study to the body of knowledge, as well as the limitations and possible areas for future research were identified.

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