



The value of workplace learning in attaining discipline-specific skills for ecotourism employment

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Abstract

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is a term widely used to refer to the type of learning which entails application and integration of theoretical learning and applied learning in the workplace. Workplace learning (WPL) therefore bridges the gap between higher education institutions and industry. Work-integrated learning comprises of various modalities, which include, project-based learning, workplace learning, applied research, service learning and apprenticeships. In the case of the tourism industry in South Africa, there is huge demand for skilled labor so that the potential of this industry to be one of the key economic drivers is realized. There is an increasing expectation on higher education institutions to produce work-ready graduates. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the significance and value of workplace learning in assisting tourism students acquire discipline-specific skills that will help in career-decision making and proficiency. Second year Ecotourism Management students from the 3Durban University of Technology completed a questionnaire after undertaking their work placement program within a duration of six months. The analysis was utilized to uncover the role of workplace learning in the attainment of relevant skills for ecotourism employment.

Keywords: Work-integrated learning, workplace learning, skills, ecotourism.

Introduction

Tourism has been earmarked in many developing countries as a growth mechanism and is amongst the prime industries globally. In South Africa, tourism is regarded as one of the key drivers of the New Growth Path Framework (DHET, 2011: 05). The significance and potential for tourism to contribute to the country's economy has allowed the government to devise and implement skills development plans for this labor-intensive industry. In the history of South African higher education, tourism training was offered in Technikons which are now converted to Universities of Technology (UoT) whilst others are now known as Technical, Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). The Council for Higher Education (CEH) (2011) states that "University teachers should be concerned about ensuring that students that graduate from their qualifications are prepared for the world in which they will live and work through WIL". Work integrated learning epitomizes learning from experiences in educational and practice settings and integrating the value of those experiences in developing the understandings, procedures and dispositions required for effective professional practice (Martín et al., 2010; Sattler 2011; Tanaka & Carlson 2012). There exists a gap between institutions and the industry when it comes to the understanding of WIL. The industry simply mistakes WIL for simple internship or work placement, whilst in institutions; WIL is used in a broader sense to accommodate a wide range of activities (Blom 2013). Forbes (2012) states that the philosophy and principles for WIL have always been an educational partnership between an institution of learning, external



stakeholders in the industry and community where the purpose is to give students an enhanced learning experience. Africa has been identified as having extreme potential for ecotourism due to its diverse wildlife and protected areas. As such, ecotourism must advance and promote sustainable development. The critical component for successful ecotourism is access to education and training (Acha-Anyi, 2018:89). Ecotourism in South Africa has been incorporated in the agenda for employment creation and sustainable development (Motau and Wale, 2018:1). In the province of KwaZulu-Natal, ecotourism has been earmarked as driver for economic growth. (The White Paper on the Development and Promotion of Tourism in KwaZulu- Natal (2008: 22). Despite the many benefits of ecotourism, its significance has not received the recognition it deserves. This is evident in the gaps in literature about the characteristics of ecotourism employment in terms of the specific skills and knowledge, which sets it apart from conventional tourism. The study will therefore attempt to bridge this gap by endeavoring to evaluate the efficacy of workplace learning in assisting ecotourism students attain discipline-specific skills.

Literature Review

Work-integrated learning (WIL) in South African higher education

The public education system of the Republic of South African is regulated by DHET and comprises universities that are research-oriented, comprehensive universities and UoT's. The higher education system is distinguished in the sense that different institutions offer various types of qualifications with Higher Education Qualification Framework (HEQF) levels (South African Qualifications Authority 2004). Most higher education institutions in the Republic of South Africa offer professional programs including Business, Education, Applied Science, Engineering and/or Health Science faculties, and many of these professional programmes (such as Architecture, Business, Engineering, Law and Medicine) have entrance requirements. Universities of technology in particular, remain competitive through the provision of career-focused education and practical learning through WIL. Tourism is a labour-intensive industry that requires skilled human capital, thus UoT's are driven by the need to assist students in obtaining real-world experience through work placements.

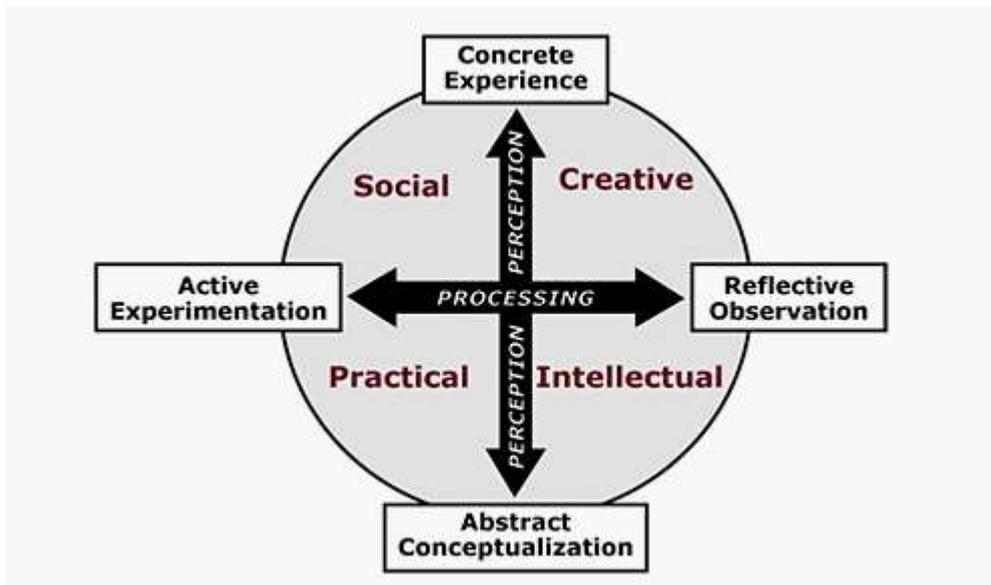
The White Paper for Post School Education and Training (DHET, 2013), states that work placement programs are commonly vague and unstructured and contribute very little to the outcomes of the qualification. Work placements are amongst the many crucial modalities of WIL. However, in many instances, work placement is merely regarded as a form of compulsory experience and a prerequisite to successfully attain a qualification. Therefore, close cooperation between employers and higher education institutions in the design of curricular and learning outcomes for WIL is necessary (DHET, 2013). The government has over the years introduced policies that emphasize the significance of WIL. The New Growth Path, the National Development Plan (RSA 2012), the National Skills Accord (DHET 2011a), the National Skills Development Strategy III (DHET 2011b), the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (DHET 2013), all allude to the growing emphasis on workplace learning as a core and vital component of vocational and occupational education, and the role this type of education and training plays in economic development and job creation.

Early interpretations and approaches to work-integrated learning

Dewey (1938) was amongst the first educational philosophers who emphasized the significance of experience in achieving a genuine education through learning by doing. Dewey's (1938) idea of vocation is expressed as a calling to an intensely felt and ethically grounded identity within a chosen career and encompasses the value of critical and educational engagement with the key issues of public life that link professional and vocational proficiency. Subsequent theorists, such as Kolb (1984) have similarly pointed out that,

experience solely is insufficient for an all-inclusive and effective learning experience, though it is part of learning. In the context of higher education, effective learning requires a knowledge foundation, a motivational context, learning tasks and activities and interaction between the learner and the learning environment (Biggs, 1995). Observation and reflection on experience by students is important for learning to occur. Students need to further develop concepts, interpret the experience by applying and testing these concepts through new experiences (Schön, 1983). More recently, the theoretical background and underpinnings of Kolb's experiential learning process and Schön's 'reflective practitioner' model have been met with criticism. In order for people to learn from experience and general reflection, critical thinking is crucial. If this type of learning is regarded as a driver to gain information about the workplace and to integrate theoretical knowledge with workplace application, then its effectiveness and value is not fully developed.

Figure 1: Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle



(Source: Young & Baker, 2004)

Workplace learning

Workplace learning is a component of WIL and occurs when students are placed in work environments for learning in order to acquire discipline-specific knowledge and skills. Workplace learning therefore typically involves students in the planning and implementation of duties and activities (Kolb, 1984). This enables students to reflect and evaluate the tasks and activities, and make necessary adjustments for future action. The reflective process is beneficial for the student to ascertain what is valuable, relevant and important to retain. In addition, reflective learning is useful in the execution of other tasks. Workplace learning consequently replicates the innate nature in which humans learn. Typically, WPL curricular tends to be grounded on Kolb's (1984) learning cycle, or its characteristic descriptions. The learning cycle suggests a sequence of four methods that elicit learning as outlined below:

- Concrete experience: Dynamic participation is a primary element; hence, learning cannot happen by merely watching or reading about something.
- Reflective observation: Emphasis on the need to ponder on tasks completed to assess their value towards achieving relevant experience.
- Abstract conceptualization: Inductive reasoning allows for the analysis and interpretation of observations, thereby creating logically sound theories.



- Active experimentation: the students cogitate how they are going to put what they have learnt into practice.

Workplace learning was designed to enhance skills and better prepare students for the world of work. However, the underpinning reason behind its partial contribution to bridging the skills gap, particularly in the tourism industry, is the rapidly changing nature of workplaces. The requirement by most employers are entry-level employees with high-level technical skills, thus creating detrimental discrepancies. This disadvantages first or second year students in a sense that the students are merely trainees, but fails to provide the student with an appropriate experience. There are discrepancies between theoretical knowledge and contextualized work knowledge, which make it difficult to generate clarification between the two, particularly when both educators and workplace supervisors inadequately understand the forms of knowledge and structures (The African Journal for Work-based learning, 2014: 34). The Swiss South African Cooperation Initiative (2013: 11) denotes that it must be recognized that effective and successful WPL must be underpinned by a solid theoretical foundation. Solid grounding in specific disciplines is crucial for students to acquire competence and proficiency in their careers. Students ought to understand the relevance of transferring theoretical knowledge to the practical environment in order to be adequately prepared for the diverse social and economic needs. Effective WPL should integrate discipline-specific knowledge to avoid divergence and an 'anti-disciplinary' attitude that overlooks fundamental concepts (CHE, 2011: 36).

Critiques of experiential education

There have been two major criticisms to the notion of offering experiential education in higher education environments. The first critique implicates the objective and purpose of experiential education in higher education institutions. The subsequent critique expresses the ambiguity regarding the educational value of these learning opportunities (Butin, 2005; Moore, 2010). The 'objective and purpose' critique of experiential education interrogates whether workplace experience should have a place in higher education. This question is reinforced by the idea that higher education has conventionally focused on cultivating students on traditional theories and texts, and may therefore be mismatched with the practical skills required in real work environments (Moore, 2010). Experiential education may hinder students from exploring alternative views of thinking and learning thereby creating a 'problem of fit' whereby knowledge acquired in higher education institutions is not well aligned with the acquaintance required for optimal and effective operation in the workplace (Moore, 2010).

The educational criticism of experiential education focuses on the eminence of experiential learning programs in higher education. The critique points out some pedagogical gaps that generally exist, including the overestimation of the value of this type of learning, lack of precise and critical reflection, poor links between theory and practice and a lack of integration with wider curricular learning and community needs (Moore, 2010). The author further clarifies the inadequacies of experiential learning when the principles of WIL are not education-oriented and instead perceived solely as a platform for career exploration or networking rather than predominantly a learning experience. If experiential learning is administered in this manner, its value is thus minimal. "The student could have learned the same things just by virtue of having a part-time job or volunteer service activity.

Experiential pedagogy, done right, is extremely rewarding but also extremely demanding" (Moore, 2010). To tackle the objective critique, Kirschner and Whitson (1997), Lave and Wegner (1999) maintain that individuals use various ways to think and learn when they are engaged in different contexts. For example, they might recognize problems in certain ways or decide to solve those problems with a range of methods and techniques, determined by the context in which the problem occurs (Moore, 2010). From this viewpoint, they propose that higher education institution highlight a scientific perspective, while the workplace emphasizes



adaptive action to make meaning (Moore, 2010). The educational critique underlines the importance of using theories such as Kolb's to organize educational environments, as these educational theories provide strategies and guidelines to assist students in transferring knowledge learned in the classroom to practice, and vice versa (Moore, 2010).

The importance of skills in tourism

The World Travel and Tourism Council (2015:08) issued a report quantifying the lack of human capital and skills in the tourism industry, which states that the challenges of human capital are higher in the tourism industry than in other sectors. At the global level, the research shows a shortfall of 14 million jobs that stand to reduce tourism's contribution to the global GDP over the next 10 years. In the years to come, progress in developing and retaining skills will require a much stronger and more coordinated effort between the private sector, educational institutions and government. The nature of the tourism industry is characterized by intensive service orientation; employees should therefore possess certain skills such as self-reliance, people and certain professional skills and over-all employability when working in this industry. However, it seems that tourism graduates are not well enough prepared and equipped with these skills to satisfy the requirements of employers (Zwane., Du Plessis & Slabbert, 2014:02).

The impacts of skills deficiencies for the tourism industry demonstrate why skilled labour is so important to the sector's growth and sustainability; these include below-potential employment levels and investment, reduced profits and higher operating costs for organisations. In addition, skill gaps where positions are occupied by under-qualified and under-experienced staff lead to inferior customer service and quality standards. and international image (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2017:10). In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), one in twenty jobs are in tourism, as the sector grows, its job creation and income generating potential increases exponentially (Novelli, 2016:44). However, an inconsistent level of professionalism affect SSA's workforce, which is largely caused by a shortage of vocationally trained employees (Spencely and Rogza, 2016:45). For decades, skills training has been left to the initiative of a few private sector players with an inconsistent level of success. Snyman (2014:38) raises the issue of rural communities in SSA largely characterized by high unemployment and poverty, low skills and heavy reliance on natural resources, prominent problems that are common to several other urban and seaside locations throughout the region.

The National Department of Tourism in South Africa in partnership with the Culture, Arts, Tourism, Hospitality and Sport Sector Education and Training Authority (CATHSSETA) recognized the necessity to reexamine the 2008 Tourism Human Resource Development Strategy, which was implemented to rationalize and streamline skills development in the tourism industry. The key findings divulge the disintegration between course content and the skills requirements by the tourism industry caused by defective engagement by some higher education institutions with industry. Furthermore, there is a pronounced need for mentoring and on-the-job training to enhance the adaptation to a contemporary technological environment (Human Sciences Research Council, 2016:04).

In 2015, South Africa recorded a 10, 8% growth of revenue from international tourism, from R68.2 billion in 2015 to R75.5 billion in 2016 as stated in the South African Tourism Annual Report (2017:12). There is a huge potential for the South African tourism industry to further contribute to employment creation and economic growth for the country (Department of Tourism 2017:45). However, the persistence challenge of skills shortages will hinder the industry from maximizing benefits. The cycle of poverty in South Africa is perpetuated by the unemployment rate which stood at 25% in the year 2017, with even higher rates for youth, at more than 50% (World Economic Forum, 2017: 11). Education and training for future skills is a critical part of realizing this potential. The root of unemployment is not only a lack of jobs; a key principal issue is also the inadequately educated workforce. Moreover, this challenge is likely to persist in the coming years due to the Fourth Industrial Revolution, characterized by



fast-paced technological progress combined with other socio-economic and demographic changes, which will further transform labor markets. (World Economic Forum, 2017:12).

General trends and need for skills in the ecotourism sector

A lot of literature has over the years focused extensively on the environmental effects of ecotourism, with very little focus on ecotourism education and employment (Monterubo and Espinosa, 2013:57). Though ecotourism employment has been discussed, the emphasis has been on its impacts in generating employment and not necessarily the economic and educational dimension. In a study by Stronza and Gordillo (2008) to examine the benefits of ecotourism in the Amazon regions of Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia, it was discovered that ecotourism is a key contributor to direct employment for local communities. As a result, ecotourism in the Amazon region is a primary source of income through direct employment as managers, tour guides, housekeepers, boat divers or from revenue generated from selling local food, handicrafts, transportation and other services. The authors further state that there is great dependence on ecotourism and other economic sectors in the area have been neglected. The huge focus on ecotourism has led to the addition of related economic activities such as agritourism and forest extraction. This empirical evidence supports the notion that some of the professions in ecotourism do not require high skill levels, thus allowing a more inter-occupation mobility. However, evidence that is empirical and scientific still lacks to identify and describe the characteristics of ecotourism employment.

A study on ecotourism impacts in Botswana by Mbaiwa and Stronza (2010) revealed that local people have immensely benefited from ecotourism through the improvement of their livelihood. The study further reports that the nature of the jobs however, require semi-skilled labour, these include cleaners, cooks, escort guides and storekeepers. The literature on ecotourism employment is still scarce, however, its economic implications in terms of direct and indirect employment cannot be denied. Prevailing literature claims that employment generated by ecotourism is often low skilled. Stronza (2007) concedes that the occurrence of ecotourism in rural areas allows for improvement in the economy of families and its contribution tends to be more than other forms of tourism. Ecotourism is also a fundamental tool for empowering local people in tourism destinations (Kiss, 2004). Though present research corroborates that ecotourism provides employment and income opportunities, few studies have adopted an exclusive focus on analysing the characteristics of ecotourism employment (Wearing and Neil, 2009:126).

Methodology

The study adopted a quantitative approach with the use of semi-structured questionnaires through a case study of the Department of Ecotourism housed at the Durban University of Technology. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2010), survey research entails obtaining information about one or more groups of people about their individualities, opinions, attitudes, or previous experiences by asking them questions and charting their answers. All questionnaires were checked for completeness and usability.

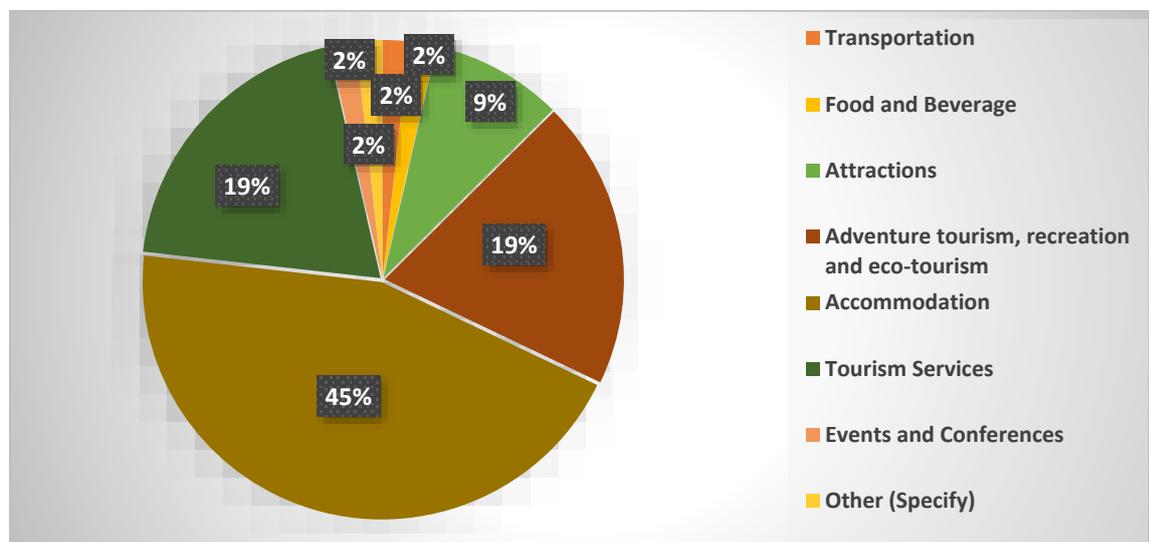
The target population comprised of students enrolled for the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management at the Durban University of Technology using a census method. These were second year students who had completed their compulsory WPL program for a duration of six months. The sample size consisted of 98 students who were purposively selected. Questionnaires were captured and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software. The use of descriptive analysis was applied to represent the findings. Qualitative data was analyzed into theoretical categories based on emerging themes from the data.

Findings and discussion

The various sectors within the industry where students undertook work placement learning

Findings indicate the categories of sectors within the tourism industry to which the students undertook workplace learning. As indicated in Figure 2 below, majority of students were placed in the accommodation sector (45%), tourism services, adventures tourism recreation and ecotourism both make up 19% each of work placements while 2% were placed in transportation, attractions, events and conferences, as well as, food and beverage departments respectively.

Figure 2: The categories of sectors within tourism where students undertook work placement learning



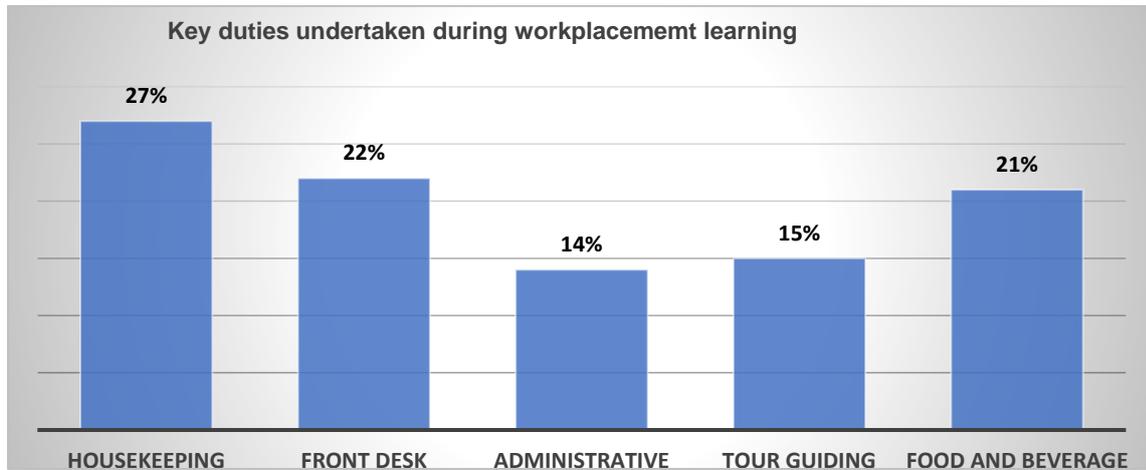
Diversity of work experience and organizational induction

The results suggest that the respondents' workplace learning was diversified in terms of exposure to various departments within the organizations where workplace learning was undertaken. A total of 87% of the respondents indicated that during the course of their placements, they were alternated to various departments/units, which meant a variety in duties thereby enhancing the overall learning experience. A few of the respondents (13%) indicated that they remained within a single department/unit during the course of their placement. The findings provide a good indication of meeting the objective of the study, as most respondents gained exposure to a variety of tasks through placement at various units/departments. Respondents further indicated that they participated in an induction program upon commencement of their work placement. A total of 73% of respondents were inducted, while 27% indicated that no induction program was offered by employer.

Key work experience and skills acquired

Figure 3 on page 8, indicates the key duties and tasks allocated and undertaken by respondents during the course of workplace learning. A total of 27% which is the majority indicated that their key duties were housekeeping. This is in line with the findings articulated in the previous section, wherein the majority of respondents (45%) were placed in the accommodation sector.

Figure 3: Key duties undertaken by respondents during the course of workplace learning



The duties and key responsibilities of respondents underpin the acquisition of skills and overall experience which will enable them to be competitive in the world of work. The results of the main skills and work experience gained through workplace learning is shown in Figure 5 below. Majority of students (25%) regarded work ethic as their most valuable skill, while customer service and communication skills were cited by 24% of respondents, respectively. Other skills attained by respondents as a result of undertaking work placement include tour guiding (11%), conservation (9%) and events management (7%). In addition, a total of 93% of respondents successfully completed their work placement program for a duration of six months. The 7% of respondents that did not complete the work placement program cited the following reasons: *“It become obsolete to carry on going to work due to the decrease in busyness and the lack of growth”, “I fell sick for a long time and the employer refused to take me back, despite having a doctor’s note and “I did my in-service very late because our coordinator failed to find it in time for me”.*

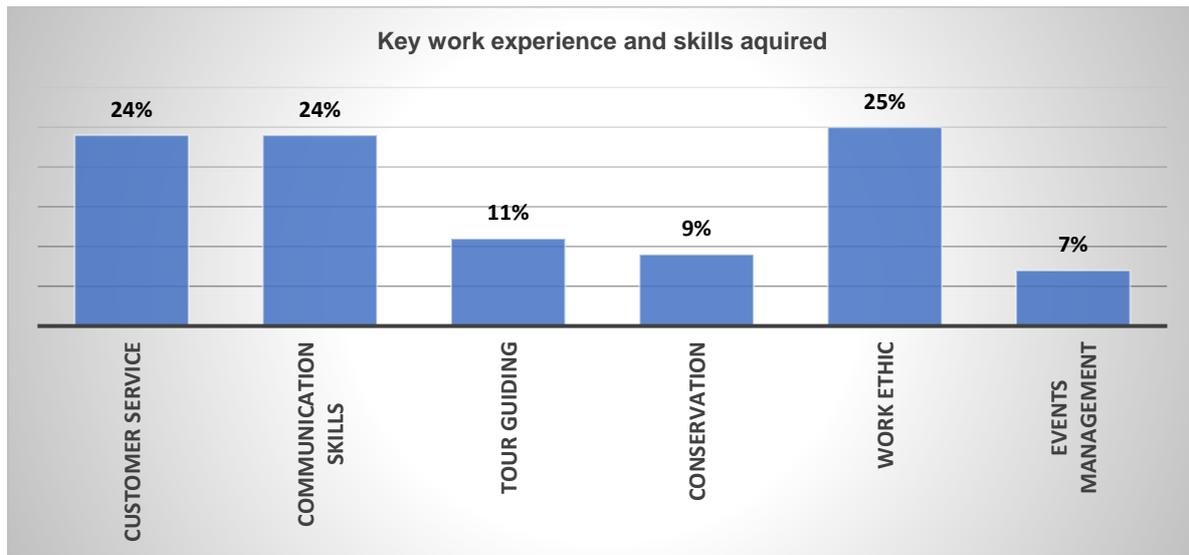
Figure 4 Images: Ecotourism students during the course of the work placement program (Authors own)





(Source: Department of Ecotourism, 2016)

Figure 5: Experience and skills acquired during workplace learning



Work placement handling and general interest in the industry

When respondents were asked to rate their ability to handle the overall workplace experience, 30% indicated that they had handled it very well, 34% felt it was well and okay, respectively. Only 2% of respondents indicated that they did not cope during their work placement. When respondents were asked whether they enjoyed workplace learning, 62% gave a positive response 'yes', while 38% of respondents did not enjoy workplace learning. In addition, respondents were questioned about whether they would recommend workplace learning to prospective students based on their own workplace learning experience. The majority (66%) indicated 'yes' that they would recommend workplace learning. Those that would not recommend workplace learning (34%) cited the following reasons: *"Because students are not treated well and they work more than the paid employees. Sometimes they even give their employees leave, and students are left to do the work"*, *"We did not study Tourism and Hospitality but rather we studied Eco-tourism"* and *"Because the employees are not welcoming and the organization well-coordinated"*. Despite the reasons stated by students not to recommend work placement learning to future students, majority (63%) indicated that their work placement learning is the type of work they would like to pursue in future.

Work placement highlights and lowlights

Figure 6 summarizes the highlights and lowlights of work placement as indicated by respondents. Exposure to workplace-based learning bears a number of benefits for students. However, it must be noted that effective learning can only occur if the tasks undertaken are relevant to the theoretical content of the discipline.

Figure 6: Highlights and lowlights of work placement

| Placement highlights | Placement lowlights |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| Exposure to various departments | Irrelevant work experience |
| New skills obtained | Working long hours |
| Networking and meeting new people | Mistreatment from other employees |
| Clarification in the decision of a career path | Working without compensation |
| Practical application of theory | |



Conclusion

The main aim of this research was to analyze the value of workplace learning in assisting students obtain relevant experience. The growth in demand for tourism in South Africa equated to the demand for skilled labor. The tourism industry in South Africa is amongst the key job creators, therefore it is important to investigate the role of workplace learning in producing skilled labor, thereby bridging the detrimental skills gap. The results indicate that an aggressive approach needs to be adopted to ensure that WPL is not only liked to areas covered within the students curriculum but that students are placed within work environments matching the skills they have acquired. A mismatch of content between the work environment and the curriculum leads to despondency and requires institutions and employers to be in accord within the ever-changing labor environment and their skills requirements. Where WPL is concerned, employers need to ensure that it benefits both their organizations as well as students.

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