



Determining tourism graduate employability, knowledge, skills, and competencies in a VUCA world: Constructing a tourism employability model

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to determine tourism graduates' employability, knowledge, skills, and competencies in a VUCA world by constructing a tourism employability model. The concept of employability differs depending on the context, as well as the views of the people making employment decisions and those seeking employment in a VUCA world. It has become imperative to ensure an adequate level of preparedness among tourism graduates in a world dominated by technology, by understanding what the important knowledge, skills, and competencies are to enhance graduates' chances of securing and sustaining employment in the tourism industry in South Africa. The researcher adopted a sequential explanatory mixed method, which entailed combining quantitative and qualitative methods. A significant relationship was found between professional skills, personality traits, knowledge skills, and operational skills in the tourism industry. The originality of this study is that it developed a tourism graduate employability model for a VUCA world that is abbreviated to include the concepts Volatile, Unknown, Complex, and Ambiguity.

Keywords: employability, tourism industry, higher education, tourism graduates, VUCA world

Introduction and Literature Review

Tourism industry and sustainable enterprise development

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2010), sustainable enterprise development prevents unequal treatment and promotes employment equity through the implementation of the principle of non-discrimination based on sex, race/ethnicity, and religion. In light of the above, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2015), a specialised agency of the United Nations (UN) stressed that sustainable enterprise development is an important source of economic growth, job creation, wealth creation, and the provision of decent work for men and women alike. Robertson and Skordis (2004) noted that co-operation between government, labour, society, and businesses is required to promote sustainable enterprises that enhance the quality of employment. However, it must be noted that the aforementioned sustainable enterprise development principles impose substantial demands in terms of education and training on small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the tourism industry. Nieman, Visser and Van Wyk (2008) emphasise that sustainable enterprise development will

only be accomplished when tourism is measured, managed, and controlled in an integrated manner. Sustainable development ought to be based on effective and carefully planned governmental policies and restrictions. Nieman et al. (2008) underscored that this is essential to establishing tourism as an industry with high international quality standards. Furthermore, it is essential that jobs be developed for local individuals and previously neglected groups. According to the ILO (2010) and the WTO (2010), long-term capabilities of enterprises are based on three pillars (Figure 1), which are required to address the triple bottom line required for sustainable development (ILO, 2010; SAT, 2012) in various tourism settings, as the nature of the industry encompasses profit, the planet, and people in enterprises.

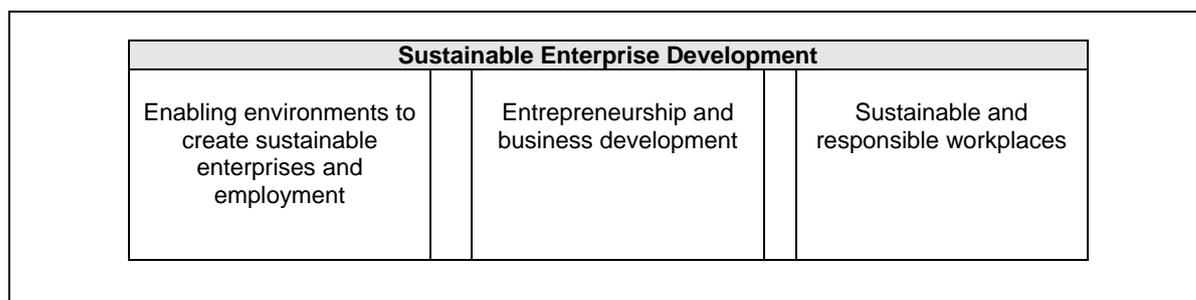


Figure 1. The three pillars of sustainable enterprise development. Source: ILO (2010).

The WTO, in 2010, initiated the Sustaining Competitive and Responsible Enterprises (SCORE) global support project to assist SMMEs to become more sustainable, competitive, and productive, so that, in turn, they can provide greater sustainable employment. SCORE has already been implemented in five countries, namely South Africa, China, Colombia, India, and Indonesia (ILO, 2010; WTO, 2010). Sustainable growth is determined by a variety of factors. People 1st (2013) identified the following as both drivers of and barriers to growth: changes in customers' disposable income and their spending patterns, changes in customers' preferences and tastes, increased expectations regarding customer service standards, the use of social media, issues of sustainability, changes in customers' profile or demographics, regulations and legislation, online connectivity or e-commerce, new technology, and the rise of new foreign tourist markets. In the South African context, the following additional challenges and trends have been identified: transformation, geographical location, product diversification, nature of the service industry, and employment legislation (Rogerson, 2005; DoL, 2008; Nieman et al., 2008; ILO, 2010; SAT, 2012; OECD, 2013; Hanekom, 2014).

Due to the recent pace of technology development and innovation, today's economy is heading towards the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (OECD, 2006) technological innovation is viewed as an engine for growth in productivity and economic development. Needs and expectations are evolving, and the tourism industry needs to keep up with these demands in order to maintain customer loyalty and satisfaction, and to constantly improve the quality of services.

Tourism graduates, however, believe technology creates more jobs, and that innovative tourism product development and entrepreneurial development will advance the industry. The reality is that, in an uncertain environment such as the tourism industry, the key to success is the on-going learning, training, and innovation capability of its employees.

The top ten skills required in any industry, according to the World Economic Forum (WEF) (2015, 2018), are highlighted in Table 1. It was noted in the study that, by 2020, different skills may be required, while others will have to be fine-tuned.



Table 1. A comparison between the skills required in 2015 and 2020

	WEF 2015	WEF 2020
1.	Complex problem-solving	Complex problem-solving
2.	Co-ordinating with others	Critical thinking
3.	People management	Creativity
4.	Critical thinking	People management
5.	Negotiation	Co-ordinating with others
6.	Quality control	Emotional intelligence
7.	Service orientation	Judgement and decision-making
8.	Judgement and decision-making	Service orientation
9.	Active listening	Negotiation
10.	Creativity	Cognitive flexibility

Source: WEF (2015, 2018)

Thus, as we equip tourism graduates for the future, it raises the question: What knowledge, skills, and competencies will be required of graduates in order for them to thrive in the VUCA world?

1. *Complex problem-solving* refers to the mental capacity to solve problems, including seeing the bigger picture. According to the WEF (2015) more than one-third (36%) of all jobs across all industries are expected by the respondents in their to require complex problem-solving as a core skill.
2. *Critical thinking* is involves logical thinking — interrogating the problem and considering various solutions, and then selecting a workable solution.
1. *Creativity* is predicted to become the key skill in the future. According to the WEF (2018), new products and advanced technologies and methods of working will require of employees to become more creative in order to benefit from these changes.
2. *People management* — according to Luu (2006), irrespective of how many jobs become automated and how advanced artificial intelligence becomes, human will always be an organisations' most prized resource.
3. *Co-ordinating with others* requires strong interpersonal skills and competencies, and is predicted to become a crucial skill by 2020. Tourism companies will still work in teams, and will have to satisfy different personalities and a variety of cultural backgrounds.
4. *Emotional intelligence* — according to the WEF (2018), social skills will be in high demand, especially persuasion, teaching others, and emotional intelligence. Especially in the tourism industry will require managing one's own behaviour when liaising with travellers from different backgrounds.
5. *Judgement and decision-making* refer to the ability to make sound judgements based on big data in order to inform tourism decisions and strategies.
6. *Service orientation* — the tourism industry is indeed service-orientated; therefore, having strong service skills requires serving the customer with the right knowledge, skills, and competencies. As the industry is constantly evolving with new consumer needs, a quicker anticipation will be required from graduates to stimulate further demand. Thus, graduates will need to become even more knowledgeable about tourism products and services.



7. *Negotiation* — As tourism jobs involve increasing use of virtual reality, voice technology, and TravBots (robots), social skills will become more important than ever before, as humans are far superior in social interaction to robots.
8. *Flexibility* — graduates should expand their personal interests, read outside their discipline and comfort zone, and embrace people who are different and who challenge their world views (Luu, 2016).

The next section elaborates on human resource development within the tourism industry.

Human resource development within the tourism industry

An overwhelming portion of the tourism industry consists of SMEs. Jolliffe and Farnsworth (2003), Littlejohn and Watson (2004), Liu and Wall (2006), the ILO (2010), and Jackson (2014b) observed that this presents a challenge in creating new products and ensuring service delivery in a domain where the quality of service plays a vital role. Staff induction, according to Thomas (2003) and Van Lill (2005), is part of human resources training, development, and evaluation. Despite close liaison with the human element in the industry, limited attention is given to education, training, and development that will allow employees to cope with the fluctuating global environment, circumstances, and vast performance requirements in terms of knowledge, skills, and employability attributes (Zehrer & Mossenlechner, 2009; OECD, 2013).

Tourism-related companies do not provide training, particularly to entry-level employees. They expect graduates to have the right knowledge, skills, and employability attributes when entering the industry (Lather, Garg & Vikas, 2014). Cervera-Taulet and Ruiz-Molina (2008) reported that tourism employers often recruit non-tourism graduates. Regarding the low skills requirements, Rivett-Carnac (2007) observed that not many accredited training providers offer recognised tourism programmes. He added that financial, time, and distance constraints discourage employees to attend the training offered by the few recognised providers.

Higher education institutions and employability

The UK's higher education institutions (HEIs) have acknowledged the continuous challenge of developing students' knowledge and employability attributes in two ways. The first was by embedding employability skills within curricula through supervised work experience. The second was by building these into curricula through stand-alone skills-based training. It is essential that HEIs equip students with a skills set that will enable them to operate skilfully within the world of work, as required by the "Learning Age" or "learning society" (European Commission (EC), 1995, p. 76). The UK's National Inquiry into Higher Education (Dearing Committee, 1997) recommended that qualifications be developed for each programme that has an outcome related to the understanding and knowledge that a student ought to have upon graduation. HEIs should also develop in students key employability skills, including effective communication, learning how to learn, the use of IT, numeracy, reasoning skills, an understanding of different practices and procedures, critical analysis, subject-specific (tourism) skills, and even specialised tourism industry IT skills when required, where disruptive technology is the norm today. However, disruptive technology in the tourism industry replaces existing technology and destabilises the tourism industry with ground-breaking alternative products and services that generate a completely new industry.

HEIs' ability to ensure graduate employability has become an important indicator of institutional quality. Hence, these institutions now include components related to employability in their academic programmes (Griesel & Parker, 2009; Rigby et al., 2009;



Akomaning, Voogt, & Pieters, 2011; Wilton, 2011). Some of these indicators include identifying personal career development options, skills, career planning, career development, project-based learning, and work-integrated learning or work exposure through role players, career advice and mentoring, as well as extracurricular experiences. However, these activities and experiences remain unconnected in the mind of graduates (Littlejohn & Watson, 2004; Kruss, 2004; Busby, 2005; Tymon, 2013; Ito, 2014), and they do not consider these influential in their personal career development. Therefore, it is crucial that academic staff facilitate the development of components of an employability programme in an integrated and coherent manner (Zehrer & Mossenlechner, 2009; Morgan & Houghton, 2011). Rae (2007) suggested that students are unlikely to distinguish interrelationships of these programmes without the necessary assistance. Innovation and changes are imperative in supporting graduates' employability attributes, hence the vital need to integrate the different aspects of employability into a qualification (OECD, 2013) such as demographic diversity in terms of social trends, skills development, economic success, and access to quality education. Improved, flexible, and innovative ways of delivering higher education then become indispensable. Barron (2007) stressed that HEIs have a double responsibility. Firstly, they need to understand the demands placed on 21st century students who study full-time and work part-time to support themselves. Academia should consider this when developing curricula, planning classes and activities, and designing appropriate assessments that support the innovative world (Zehrer & Mossenlechner, 2009). Secondly, the advantages of experiencing the work practically should be acknowledged. In other words, programmes should be flexible, in order to accommodate those who work part-time, and recognise students with work experience, and provide credits where warranted. Barron (2007) stated that students require HEIs to liaise with industry partners, represent students, source opportunities for possible employment, and provide students with support and guidance where needed. Sourcing greater opportunities could even be on the international front (Wakelin-Theron, 2018).

Given the increasing cost of higher education, such expectations are not unreasonable (Barron, 2007). Maharasoa and Hay (2001), in a study conducted in South Africa, remarked that jobs are unevenly distributed geographically and among tourism industry sectors. Similarly, the WTO (2010) highlighted the uneven spread of employment, especially its distribution per sector and over different occupations. Reference was made to the causes of the apprehension about the quality of education and concerns about employability, skills, and competencies. However, research indicates that students generally take an extended period to adjust to their new life at a HEI (HESA, 2009). Furthermore, a significant percentage of students drop out in their first year. Thus, the first year is a high-risk period in terms of retention (Cervera-Taulet & Tuiz-Molina, 2008; DHET, 2011; McIntyre, Todd, Huyjser & Tehan, 2012; CHE, 2013; HESA, 2014; Ito, 2014). Furthermore, some students have indicated that studying towards a tourism qualification was their second choice (Wakelin-Theron, 2015).

According to Deloitte University Press (DUPress), HEIs have to provide advanced online resources and adjust qualifications to support and advance online, flexible, and part-time students if they do not want to be replaced by the World Wide Web (DUPress, 2014). However, according to Wang et al. (2009), the imperative of keep up with the fast pace of technology is challenging and expensive. Thus, both government and the private sector should invest financially in science, technology, arts, social sciences, and humanities, to ensure a more harmonious development of society (McQuiad & Lindsay, 2005). HEIs that have not yet achieved world-class academic status need to position themselves and grow. In this way, they can demonstrate that academics can teach and support students effectively in this digital age, and equip and retain students (Page & O'Connell, 2010; Pegg, Waldock, & Hendy-Isaac, 2012).

According to Prokou (2008), greater emphasis should be placed on the mobility of both students and academics, in order to improve knowledge, skills, and competencies, thereby ultimately advancing employability. In terms of research, for example, HEIs should be the



centre of new knowledge. According to the OECD (2013), the challenge for HEIs is to stimulate applied and basic research, and to apply it to the country's opportunities and industry needs. HEIs should focus on professional preparation and scientific research in academic disciplines, equipping students with current knowledge, skills, and competencies required by the work environment (OECD, 2013; Donina & Luka, 2014). In today's interconnected and ever-changing world, technology and science are indispensable. They have the potential to enable an inter-institutional and interdisciplinary kind of HEI with a focus on meeting society's needs (OECD, 2013). Rae (2007) noted that the fulfilment of this commitment to society necessitates the strengthening of the ties between higher education and its different role players, namely societies, the private sector, and the public sector.

To develop advanced human capital, Roberts (2009), People 1st (2013), and Donina and Luka (2014) indicated that role players or to work together to create mechanisms aimed at promoting institutional players. The creation of world-class HEIs boasting the latest scientific and technological equipment and operating through an intercultural team-working approach was suggested as the answer (Robert, 2009). Thus, governments around the world should contribute financially to encourage and support this endeavour (OECD, 2013).

The results of a study conducted by Barron (2007) indicated the need for academics to institutionalise various types of part-time work for students of tourism, given the vocational nature of the industry. This shows that it is not unreasonable for students to expect HEIs to have strong agreements with the tourism industry, so that they are able to effectively assist students in locating part-time work opportunities (Littlejohn & Watson, 2004; Rae, 2007). However, such relationships mean that HEIs will have to contribute to the resolution of pay disputes, develop students' sense of job security, and be more involved in the tenuous relations between students and their employers.

Part-time work is already a privilege for full-time students, due to the high unemployment rate in South Africa and students' financial constraints. According to Rae (2007), enterprising graduates are more employable. As such, it is advantageous to integrate career and enterprise development into discussion topics included in the curriculum (Morgan & Houghton, 2011). However, such an approach could present challenges to the culture, structure, and operational system of HEIs (Rae, 2007). The objective of entrepreneurial education is to encourage students to be enterprise-orientated in their thinking and actions, with self-employment or entrepreneurship generally being a possibility rather than the intended outcome (Ring, Dickinger & Worber, 2009). Rae's (2007) study highlighted the persistence of challenges related to the integration of career development perspectives through enterprising learning, indicating that entrepreneurial development has not been effective in most HEIs.

Types of tourism graduates

The massification of HEIs and the widening of access to systems are contributing to growing student diversity and an increase in the number of graduates. Li and Miller (2013) observed that HEIs are responsible for the perception of over-educated workers, due to contact between the job-search processes and occupational fields. Additionally, the world of work has changed dramatically over recent years, due to government policies compelling HEIs to widen student access. Hence, the profile and size of the student body have been transformed (Purcell, Wilton & Elias, 2007; Kumar, 2007; HESA, 2009). Graduates are more attracted to jobs in large, established organisations with a global footprint than to positions in SMEs (Li & Miller, 2013). Hjalager (2003) confirmed that employment in 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.

Different types of students are enrolled in HEIs, in different occupational fields. Elias and Purcell (2004) identified different categories of occupational fields for the graduate labour



market: 1) traditional occupation graduates, 2) modern occupation graduates, 3) new occupation graduates, and 4) niche occupation graduates. Purcell et al. (2007, p. 37) also identified another group as “mature graduates.” This is a “complex and contested term,” since graduates above 21 years of age are considered mature students. Purcell et al. (2007) remarked that lifelong learning includes further enlargement of the higher education 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 graduates at HEIs as the value of a degree increases, while many of these students come from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Purcell et al., 2007). Purcell et al. (2007) indicated that mature graduates have greater difficulty obtaining employment than their younger peers, and receive lower financial compensation. Purcell et al. (2007) added that mature graduates often offer the work environment precisely what it requires, namely a strong work ethic, more work experience, and a wide variety of transferable skills such as time management, flexibility, stability, adaptability, and commitment. Holmes (2013, p. 549) supported the view that graduates’ skills “relate strongly to issues of social positioning.” Various HEIs have made an effort to embed some of these skills in their curricula (Kumar, 2007; Fidgeon, 2010; Coetzee, 2012; Rosenberg et al., 2012; 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 et al., 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. The processual approach (Holmes, 2013) to employability focuses on graduates’ identity, as well as how advanced interventions and the curriculum enhance graduates’ employability. Tomlinson (2007) suggested that graduates are now more informed by HEIs regarding the labour market, and have a better understanding of and adopt different approaches to the labour market (Kumar, 2007; Wang, 2008; Ito, 2014).

In addition, graduates not only develop their own individual profiles and credentials, but also acquire specific skills and attitudes as a strategy to gain employment (Tomlinson, 2007; Ito, 2014). The combinations of factors that influence graduates is 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) and Dhiman (2012) indicated that tourism establishment owners are looking to employ graduates that are flexible, adaptable with the right essential skill set applicable to a discipline. Thomas and May (2010) tabulated four different dimensions of such prospective employees: circumstantial, cultural, dispositional and educational.

Under the circumstantial dimension the industry regard geographical location, access to transport services, age, marital status, flexibility, paid/voluntary employment, responsibilities, access to IT and flexibility, time available, caring, entitlements and financial background or means. Relating to the cultural dimension which the industry holds in high regard according to Thomas and May (2010) is the cultural background, and include aspects like language, values, religion, cultural capital, social background and belief, country of origin/residence and race/ethnicity. On the dispositional dimension the industry holds the following in high regards namely: aspiration; attitude, assumptions, beliefs; confidence, expectations; self-esteem; motivation; expectations; interests; preferences; learning style perspectives, maturity emotional intelligence, self-awareness. The last dimension which relates to the educational level and type of entry qualification, skills, knowledge, education, life- and work experience, and learning approaches. Clearly, there exists an extensive and diverse range of graduate



typologies. The aim of this paper is to determine graduate employability, knowledge, skills and competencies in a VUCA world. The next section describes the research method used in the study.

Methodology

The researcher adopted a sequential explanatory mixed method, which entailed combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The research consisted of two phases. During Phase 1, a quantitative research method was used, where questionnaires were distributed to two sets of respondents: one to the tourism industry (N = 354) and one to tourism graduates (N= 207). A total of 561 respondents completed and returned the questionnaires. The survey instrument contained 33 items. The respondents had to rate each employability attribute on a five-point Likert-type scale. To verify that the dataset was appropriate for the application of factor analysis, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test of sphericity were conducted; the factor analysis was applied using varimax rotation. During Phase 2, the qualitative research approach was applied to investigate graduate employability in greater depth. During this stage, 12 participants were selected: three from the tourism industry, three tourism graduates who were working in the industry, and three tourism academics who were experts in the field and were located in Gauteng. Content analysis was performed on the data collected during interviews.

Findings

The Kaiser-Meyer Olkin coefficient was 0.888; factor analysis was appropriate for the gathered data, as the value was above 0.6 (Field, 2009). Bartlett's test of sphericity ought to be statistically significant [$p < .05$ or above]. The Sig value was 0.000, and supported the correlation matrix (Pallant, 2011). Bartlett's test was highly significant [$p < 0.001$]. The result was 0.000; this suggested that the collected data were suitable for factor analysis. The factor analysis was applied using varimax rotation. According to Field (2009), reliability refers to the ability of a research instrument to provide consistent results in repeated uses. A reliability analysis was done of the questionnaire used in the present study. Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the internal consistency of the items. The reliability coefficient of Cronbach alpha lies between 0 and 1. Higher values indicate greater reliability. The rule of thumb is that a Cronbach alpha coefficient > 0.9 is excellent, > 0.8 is good, > 0.7 is acceptable, > 0.6 is questionable, > 0.5 is poor, and < 0.5 is undesirable (George & Mallery, 2003). The higher the alpha value, the more reliable the instrument is. According to TerreBlanche and Durrheim (2002), a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.75 is desirable. The reliability analysis test results for this study are provided in the following tables.

Table 2. Cronbach alpha reliability of the Employability, knowledge, skills and competencies Scale

Construct	Professional skills	Operational skills	Personality traits	Knowledge and skills
Cronbach's alpha	0.828	0.760	0.784	0.716
Number of items	8	5	6	3

Overall, 12 participants were interviewed during the second phase of the research. Each participant was interviewed to obtain specific information on employability. The data analysis technique used was content analysis, which is best utilised to make sense of a large volume



of qualitative material, in an attempt to identify core consistencies and meaning. In South Africa, higher education academics, tourism industry employers, and graduates have identified various tourism-related practices, perspectives, and gaps. The Confederation of British Industry - CBI (2012) noted that research conducted in different geographical regions and industry sectors regarding essential knowledge and skills clearly showed marked differences between the three parties' perceptions of the particular attributes required. The current research corroborates this finding.

The findings of the current study confirmed that, generally, tourism graduates lack work-readiness and experience, as some HEIs offer neither work-integrated learning in their tourism qualifications, nor integrated and coherent practices to advance career planning and development. They also neglect integrated and specific computer skills. It was concluded that HEIs require assistance to interrelate those additional guidance practices, which are available at some HEI within the tourism discipline. The findings also corroborated that the tourism industry is well known for its limited levels of training and lack of the required structure to support HEIs by providing supervisors and mentors to guide students doing practical work. This has led to what some researchers refer to as an 'expectation gap' between tourism graduates and the tourism industry (Wang et al., 2009). Most HEIs seem to be lagging behind in terms of equipping graduates with the right set of professional and operational knowledge and skills. Some constraints were identified by tourism academics, namely students' backgrounds, geographical location, lack of financial support to advance practical work experience, graduates' lack of or limited exposure to the latest technology and world of work, students' overall knowledge of the lack of interest in tourism as a discipline, students' misperceptions regarding tourism careers, and the difficulty of finding tourism academics with industry-specific experience. Lastly, a considerable constraint is that traditional teaching methods do not develop employability skills sufficiently. In the current time of rapid technological change and advancements, additional innovative skills sets are necessary, as technologies are disruptive within the tourism industry. Some HEIs find it difficult to adjust their curricula every time IT advances occur. In other words, it is difficult for HEIs to keep up with the exceptionally fast pace of change within the tourism industry.

Tourism industry experts indicated that they seek graduates with differentiating qualities and a variety of essential skills. The absence of these prioritised essential skills results in a mismatch that could limit graduates' opportunities to enter and sustain employment within the tourism industry. Clearly, the growth path in the tourism sector is dominated by privately owned enterprises. While government has established various policies and initiatives to support the tourism industry (DEAT, 2008), these policies and initiatives do not seem to have been well executed or operationalised, as transformation within the industry is rather slow. The tourism industry is generally affected by negative perceptions about its recruitment methods, employment practices, and working conditions. Hence, work in the tourism industry is often referred to as 'atypical employment.' This is perceived negatively, and it significantly influences job quality. However, part-time work, which is a form of atypical employment that tends to receive a mixed response, could also contribute to advancing an individual's knowledge and skills acquisition. Therefore, students should consider appropriate and relevant part-time work while studying, to enhance their chances of securing employment after graduation. Tourism graduates perceive themselves as readily employable. They expect to travel the world, yet they have limited experience of tourism products and services. The study also revealed that graduates lack tourism-specific IT skills, have insufficient knowledge of the tourism industry and operational skills, and are not sure what is expected of them. They are also concerned about their limited exposure to the authentic world of work. The general view is that the majority of black tourism graduates have not travelled outside their familiar areas, as their families do not have a culture of participating in tourism. This is owing to various reasons, namely access to additional disposable income, no interest or a dislike in travelling, no time in or knowledge about the sector, and travel documentation constraints, to mention a few. Graduates know they require professional, operational, and practical skills, and, in some instances, appropriate

personality traits. Pool and Sewell (2007) emphasised that employability is a lifelong issue; nobody is ever perfectly employable. However, the issue of employability in terms of knowledge and skills continues to reflect a gap with regard to the perceptions of tourism graduates, academics, and the tourism industry. This state of affairs has adversely affected the employment of tourism graduates who aspire to work in this industry.

Constructing a tourism employability model

The study focused on enhancing graduate employability of tourism graduates within the tourism industry, using a three-way perspective. The concept of employability differs depending on the context, as well as people making employment decisions and those seeking employment. Graduates are not always employable, because they lack certain knowledge, skills, employability attributes, or work experience. Therefore, it has become imperative to ensure an adequate level of preparedness of tourism graduates, including employability attributes, to enhance their chances of securing and sustaining employment. A concerted effort was made to conceptualise the phenomenon of employability and to analyse it within the tourism industry, using data gathered from tourism academics, tourism industry representatives, and tourism graduates. The objective was to construct a model to enhance graduate employability to enhance graduates' career prospects. This model below was developed to support tourism graduates, the tourism industry, and HEIs in their endeavour to enhance graduate employability. The model identifies knowledge, skills, and competencies required in the tourism industry, which are grouped into four distinct categories.

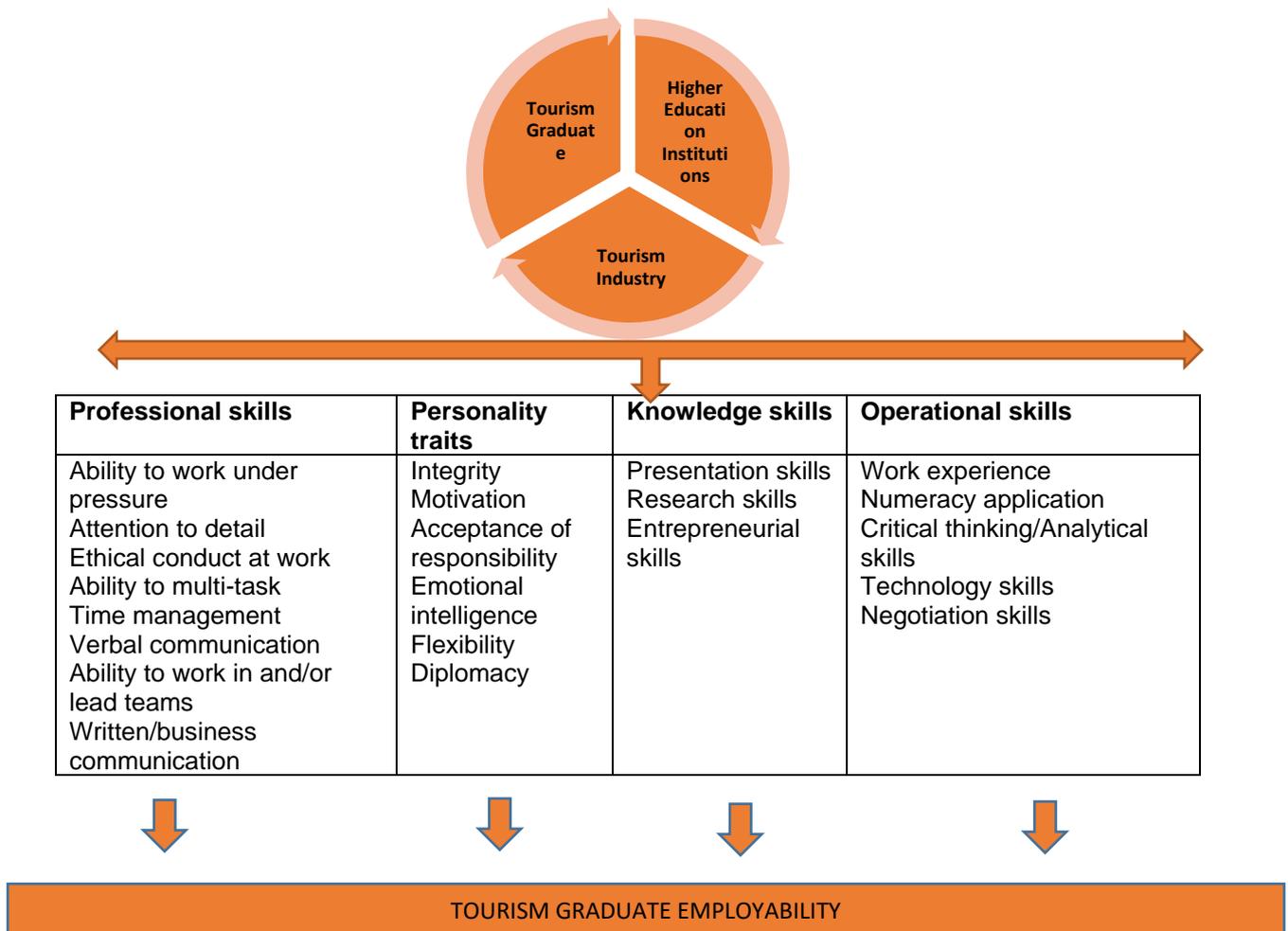


Figure 2. Constructing a tourism employability model Source: Compiled by researcher



Figure 2 depicts the relationship between the role players. HEIs, the tourism industry, and tourism graduates cannot function effectively in isolation. The three role players have to work collaboratively to ensure that graduate employability in the tourism industry is achieved and sustained. The main factors that influence tourism graduate employability are grouped into four categories, namely Professional skills, Personality traits, Knowledge skills, and Operational skills.

Prior to this research, there was a lack of literature illustrating employability, knowledge, skills, and competencies requirements for new graduates into South Africa's tourism industry. The researcher proposes the above model as a means to enhance graduate employability through the different role players. The model links all three role players (the tourism graduate, HEIs, and the tourism industry) that play a fundamental role in the tourism industry regarding the transfer of knowledge, skills, and competencies. The role players' perspective will help to facilitate the identification of and debates on implementation of the knowledge, skills, and competencies required in the tourism industry.

Implications

It is important that graduates and HEIs are aware of the employability attributes regarded as required by the tourism industry, and that there is a significant relationship between the required professional skills, personality traits, knowledge skills, and operation skills. This provides the basis for entry into the industry, as well as to enhance curriculum programme development and identification of areas where educational expertise is required. HEIs need to focus on mechanisms to enhance knowledge, skills, and competencies in what has become an extremely competitive market, and now is an appropriate time, as HEIs are in a state of significant transformation, and are required rethink the ways they engage with and equip students with knowledge, skills, and competencies. Higher education has also become immensely complex in nature, which requires similarly complex systems to help leaders to steer their academic institutions in the right direction to achieve success. It would be in the interest of HEIs that offer tourism qualifications to offer innovative programmes and alternative forms of credentials in response to the rapid advancement of the tourism industry.

Conclusions

This article hopefully makes a substantial contribution to understanding tourism graduates' employability challenges by reflecting on the relevant employability skills. The findings of the current study confirmed that, generally, tourism graduates lack work-readiness and experience, as, generally, HEIs do not offer work-integrated learning in their tourism qualifications. Considering South Africa's economic reliance on tourism, there is clearly an urgent need for integrated and coherent practices to advance tourism students' career planning and development. They also require industry-specific computer skills. The findings also corroborated that the tourism industry is well known for its limited levels of training and lack of the required structure to support HEIs by providing supervisors and mentors to guide students doing practical work. Graduate employability should become a central concern for HEIs, the tourism industry, and graduates, as South Africa has a large number of graduate youths who are unemployed. The value of the proposed model lies in its proposition of the required skills and the recommendation that students and industry partners work closely to enhance graduate employability.

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