

The integration of the hospitality curriculum in the work-integrated learning placement to enhance knowledge and employability

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ABSTRACT

A key focus of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), as a higher education institution, is to produce employable graduates. Research has shown (McNamara & Ruinard, 2016; McAllister & Nagarajan, 2015) that the integration of the curriculum into a Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) placement is an important aspect in improving the employability of graduates. The purpose of this paper is to discuss whether the required learning outcomes of the CPUT Hospitality Management curriculum are incorporated into the WIL placement in preparation for future employment of hospitality graduates.

This study used a quantitative research approach. Data was collected via online surveys and all responses were anonymous. The study population consisted of 159 hospitality students registered at CPUT in 2017, and 49 hospitality establishments that accepted these students for WIL placements in the same year. Data was analysed using SPSS version 24 and presented with tables and graphs.

The findings revealed that 51% of students identified the link between the learning outcomes of the curriculum and actual work completed during the WIL placement, and that 61% implemented these learning outcomes. This meant more than 40% of students could not identify the learning outcomes.

There is a need for a revised method of integrating the learning outcomes into the WIL placement by improving the WIL preparation classes, and including these learning outcomes in the WIL assessment forms. Although there are students who are able to identify the learning outcomes during their WIL placement, the number is insufficient to meet the expectations of the institution.

Keywords: Curriculum, hospitality industry, employability, work-integrated learning, learning outcomes

INTRODUCTION

There is considerable research in the responsibility of higher education institutions to enhance the employability of students through the development of graduate attributes (Beaumont, Gedye & Richardson, 2016; Knight & York, 2003; McNamara, 2013; Oliver, 2013; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). Research has shown that there is a reduction in graduate unemployment in the case of students undertaking WIL placements (Jonck, 2014). Smith and Worsfold (2015) explain that students given the opportunity to work in the “real world” develop skills that enhance their ability to secure employment almost immediately after the completion of their studies. For these reasons WIL has become an

important component within the structures of university education (Jackson & Wilton, 2016; Jacobs & Teise, 2014; McNamara, 2013; Smith, 2012). At the Cape Town Hotel School, (CTHS), a department of the Faculty of Business and Management Sciences at CPUT, the WIL component is embedded as a credit-bearing subject in the National Diploma of Hospitality Management (ND.HM). This means there is a requirement that the WIL subject is assessed according to expected learning outcomes of the subject. Reich, Collins & Bartlett (2016) support this statement, stating that the importance of the assessment of learning outcomes in hospitality programs cannot be underestimated. However, before the assessment can take place, it is important to establish whether the learning outcomes of the ND.HM are incorporated into the WIL placement. Tensions exist between the hospitality industry and higher education institutions regarding learning outcomes, and the focus on management knowledge and operational skills (Jiang & Alexakis, 2017; Nachmias, Walmsley & Orphanidou, 2017). The assessment of WIL also has numerous challenges due to the variable conditions within a work environment which make it difficult to ensure that appropriate and thorough methods of assessing WIL students are used (Ferns & Zegwaard, 2014; Hodges, Eames & Coll, 2014). The purpose of this paper is to discuss whether the required learning outcomes of the CTHS ND.HM curriculum are incorporated into the WIL placement in preparation for future employment of hospitality graduates.

DEFINING WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING AT CPUT

Because it is an important part of the hospitality qualification at CPUT, it is essential that the concept of WIL is understood. Engel-Hills, Garraway, Jacobs, Volbrecht & Winberg (2010) identified that the Work-Integrated Learning Research Unit at CPUT use the term “work-integrated learning” (WIL) to best explain the integration of the educational requirements of the institution into the workplace-learning module. They define WIL as “an educational approach that aligns academic and workplace practices for the mutual benefit of students and workplaces” (Engel-Hills et al., 2010). Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher and Pretto (2008) consider WIL to be a number of strategic processes that considers a specifically designed Australian curriculum to allow the theoretical aspects to be incorporated into the work environment. Similarly, the Council of Higher Education (CHE) Good Practice Guide defines WIL as “an umbrella term to describe curricula, pedagogic and assessment practices, across a range of academic disciplines that integrate formal learning and workplace concerns.” (Winberg, Engel-Hills, Garraway & Jacobs, 2011). Eames and Cates (2004) agree that the purpose of the WIL placement is to integrate learning from the academic environment with learning that occurs in the workplace, and add that the success of this integration is dependent on the curriculum and pedagogy informing WIL programs.

UNDERSTANDING THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

The hospitality industry is an element within the tourism industry (Wood, 2015) and the two industries are often jointly referred to as the hospitality and tourism industry. The crux of these industries is that they are generally service-related, in the sense that they provide a service to guests. According to Walker (2009) hospitality and tourism can be divided into five sub-sections, namely travel and tourism, lodging, assembly and event management, restaurants, managed services, and recreation. Figure 1, adapted from Walker (2009), illustrates examples of the types of service-related sectors found within each section of the industry. The focus of this study is on the lodging sector of the hospitality and tourism industry which encompasses hotels, lodges and resorts. The core purpose of these establishments is to provide

guests with accommodation and, depending on the type of hotel, services such as restaurants, bars, lounges, meeting and convention rooms, health spas, business centers, concierge services, in-room dining and general information services (Walker, 2009).

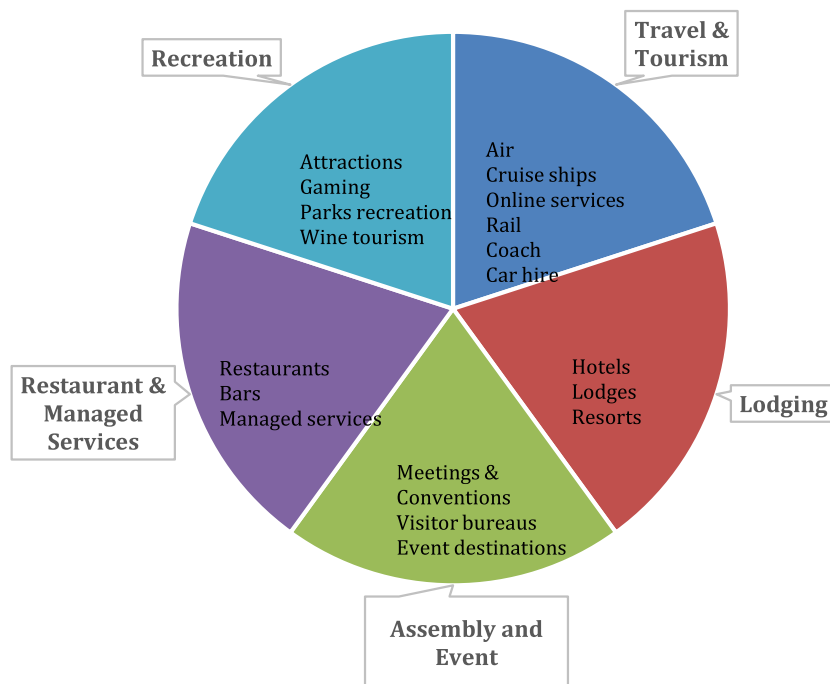


FIGURE 1: The scope of hospitality and tourism (Walker, 2009)

Hotels consist of a number of major departments that operate with revenue and cost centers on a daily basis. These departments are referred to as rooms division, food and beverage, marketing and sales, human resources, financial control, and facilities, and each department is headed by an executive manager and numerous staff to “get little things right all the time.” (Walker, 2009). The WIL program has to correlate with the functions of each of the departments to ensure that students are trained in the skills of each function.

CONCEPTUALIZING THE HOSPITALITY CURRICULUM

Numerous researchers have emphasized the importance of developing suitable hospitality curricula that incorporates the competencies required by the hospitality industry (Stansbie, Nash, & Chang, 2016; Jiang & Alexakis, 2017; Leung, Wen, & Jiang, 2018). The curriculum design of a hospitality qualification is important as it has an impact on the graduates who will eventually enter the hospitality industry. A combination of operational and behavioral skills should be implemented in the curriculum design to meet the standards for accreditation purposes (Leung, Wen & Jiang, 2018). According to Wood (2015) the purpose of education in hospitality is to train the front-line workers, like chefs, waiters, receptionists, and rooms staff, although the oldest two hotel schools, namely, the Hotel School in Lausanne in Switzerland, and the School of Hotel Administration of Cornell University, USA, have always focused on teaching the best methods of managing hotels (Wood, 2015). Given the competencies required in the

dynamic environment of hotels in the 21st century, the focus of the curriculum should be on the managerial aspects required to succeed in the hotel environment.

In 2009 a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) report by Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley (2009) discussed the many concerns of higher education in the 21st century. An important element in this report is the massification of higher education, in terms of which the number and diversity of students joining higher education institutions have increased dramatically. This has led to changes in the type of students at universities and, according to Biggs and Tang (2011), the onus is on the university to find ways of teaching and developing student engagement to ensure that all students can achieve the sought-after qualification. This has led to the “student-centered” approach to education, where the emphasis is placed on “what the students are expected to be able to know and or/do at the end of the module or program” (CPUT. Fundani, 2017). The concept of learning outcomes has developed over the years in line with the student-centred approach to learning.

There are various definitions for learning outcomes, but they are all quite similar. Kennedy (2007) gives the following definition: “Learning outcomes are statements of what a student is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completion of a process of learning”. The learning outcomes for a hospitality program incorporate specific skills relevant to the hospitality industry, such as leadership, critical-thinking, quantitative reasoning, ethical reasoning (Reich *et al.*, 2016). Graduates are expected to display these attributes on completion of their qualification.

Each subject within the qualification has specified learning outcomes that should be integrated into the learning outcomes of the WIL component. According to Biggs and Tang (2011) there should be no more than five or six learning outcomes per subject. Several topics can be integrated into one learning outcome, since too many learning outcomes makes the alignment of teaching/learning and assessment activities impossible to manage, producing an ineffective learning environment. Biggs and Tang (2011) explain that although different professional education programs may have detailed and specific learning outcomes for WIL placements, there are learning outcomes that are common to the majority of professional programs. These learning outcomes are designed for the student to be able to:

- Integrate knowledge and skills learned in university to real-life professional settings;
- Apply theories and skills to practice in all aspects of professional practice;
- Work collaboratively with all parties in multidisciplinary workplace settings, and
- Practice with professional attitudes and social and ethical responsibilities in their respective professions (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

Whilst working in these departments the student would regularly apply theoretical knowledge acquired from the other core subjects in the curriculum:

- Business communication skills are applied through verbal and written communication; for example, when working as a receptionist the student has to communicate with guests;
- Hospitality management theoretical knowledge is applied as students identify different management styles during their exposure to different managers. Conflict management skills are exercised when students are placed in confrontational situations with guests and staff;

- Hospitality financial management knowledge is applied when the students carry out banking and cash-up duties under the guidance of a supervisor;
- Hospitality information systems knowledge is applied whilst working in reservations, where email and MS Office are integral to the daily work;
- Hospitality Industry Law theoretical knowledge is important in understanding the legislation pertaining to the tobacco, liquor and gaming laws. For example, a guest may request alcohol outside of legitimate service hours; armed with the legal knowledge, the student can confidently deal with the guest's request.

A carefully designed WIL program is needed to integrate the learning outcomes required for each subject.

RESEARCH METHODS

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this paper is to discuss whether the required learning outcomes of the CPUT ND.HM curriculum are incorporated into the WIL placement in preparation for future employment of hospitality graduates.

Participants

This study investigated whether the 2017 CTHS WIL students could identify the learning outcomes of the ND.HM curriculum during their WIL placement. Data was obtained from hospitality industry stakeholders to establish their understanding of the skills required of graduates to increase their employability. To be able to gain valid and reliable data it was necessary that data be obtained from both students and industry stakeholders involved in the same placement period. For this reason the study population was limited to students and hospitality industry stakeholders involved in WIL placements during the 2017 academic year and can be identified as:

- All the students registered for WIL at the CTHS in 2017;
- All the hotels in the Western Cape that accepted CTHS students for their WIL placements in 2017.

For this study the population of students numbered 159 consisting of 86 second- and 73 third-year hospitality management students at the CTHS registered for the WIL subject in 2017. Because the population size was relatively small and manageable, the entire population of students became the sample, and sampling was not in fact required. All the students who accessed the questionnaire agreed to complete it, but only 75 actually did. Twelve students who formed part of the sample were not eligible to complete the questionnaire as they did not complete their WIL placements in 2017. The sample size of the hospitality establishments was 49, all of which were within the Western Cape and had accepted second- and third-year students for WIL placements in 2017. Of the sample group, seven establishments belonging to the same hotel group, declined to complete the questionnaire due to company policy. Of the 49 questionnaires distributed, 21 were completed.

Methodology

A descriptive research approach was used to allow the delineation of the learning outcomes incorporated in the ND.HM curriculum. This included establishing whether the students understood what the expected learning outcomes were, identified the link between the learning outcomes and the actual work, and could implement the learning outcomes on a day-to-day basis. In incorporating the learning outcomes into the WIL placement, it is important that these outcomes be assessed. Data was obtained to establish whether the assessment of their work performance by the workplace supervisors contributed to meeting the expected learning outcomes. The data collection was done through a quantitative research approach, however a mixed-method approach was used to obtain additional information from industry stakeholders to determine whether there were additional attributes required of graduates that were not highlighted in the questionnaires. The quantitative data was obtained through two different questionnaires distributed to the population groups with each questionnaire compiled of a combination of quantitative questions. The first questionnaire targeted the key stakeholders within the hospitality industry who accepted CTHS students for WIL placements in 2017. The second questionnaire was sent to the second- and third-year students at the CTHS who had completed their WIL placements in 2017. The questionnaires were distributed via email and all data collection was anonymous.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the reliability and validity of the instruments used in this study, the questionnaires and interview questions were adapted and modified after feedback from a pilot study. The questionnaires and interview questions were vetted by a CPUT statistician and the CPUT Ethics Committee before the fieldwork commenced.

The data was captured and coded using SPSS Version 24. Each question was analyzed and the findings interpreted in relation to the study. In some instances comparative analysis was done between two questions to gain further insight into the outcomes of the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Incorporation of the Learning Outcomes in the WIL Placement

The purpose of this study was to establish whether the CTHS students could identify the link between the learning outcomes of the hospitality curriculum and the actual work completed during the WIL placement. Industry stakeholders were questioned regarding the importance of the assessment process in contributing to student learning. The initial point of departure was to establish whether students actually understood the expected learning outcomes of the qualification. The findings were positive with 89% of students agreeing that they were aware of the learning outcomes, and therefore the expectations of them. However, when questioned regarding their ability to identify the link between the expected learning outcomes and actual work completed during the WIL placement, only 51% of respondents felt they could identify this link, and 61% felt they could implement the learning outcomes on a regular basis.

Considering that the success of a WIL placement is based on the application, development and consolidation of the theoretical work into the workplace (Hall, Pascoe & Charity, 2017), the feedback

obtained in this study illustrates there is something of a gap in the integration of the theoretical and practical aspects of the WIL placement for some CTHS students. Winberg *et al.* (2011) argue that a student is required to reflect on the experiences gained during a WIL placement and develop their own theoretical understanding. Gannon, Rodrigo & Santoma (2016) similarly claim that WIL is a process of doing and reflecting.

Assessment of Learning Outcomes Through Work Performance

Data was obtained to determine the degree to which the assessment of students' work performance contributes to meeting the learning outcomes of the ND.HM. This feedback was positive where 73% of the students agreed that their assessment process contributed to learning and the meeting of learning outcomes by identifying areas for improvement. The findings from the industry stakeholders correlated with these results, where 90% of the industry stakeholders agreed that assessment of work performance contributed to meeting learning outcomes. WIL links the theoretical outcomes with the practical aspects of the curriculum in a real-world environment (Gannon et al., 2016), and a WIL placement can only be validated if the students achieve the learning outcomes of the curriculum. Smith and Worsfold (2015) stress the importance of "[measuring] both the 'outcomes' of these programs, and the 'processes' by which these outcomes are generated". The WIL component of the ND.HM is the capstone of the qualification, and the questions posed were designed to ascertain whether the students understood the exit-level outcomes of the qualification, and whether they felt that they had achieved these outcomes during the WIL placement.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The learning outcomes must encompass the attributes expected by the hospitality industry and increase the employability of graduates. Although the learning outcomes of the hospitality management qualification are quite specific, in real-world situations they do not seem so clearly defined. The student must learn to identify how certain of the outcomes fit into the daily tasks performed during the WIL placement. For example, the subject hospitality management is a major subject for the ND.HM, yet there is no one specific department where the student would be able to implement the theory learnt in this subject. Rather, the theoretical knowledge of management must be applied across all departments and in a variety of situations. The recommendation is that these learning outcomes are incorporated into the ND.HM. The WIL placement requires the support of the academic supervisor, commencing with the preparation of students for the placement by identifying the skills, learning outcomes, and competencies that they are required to develop (McNamara, 2013). These learning outcomes should be clearly explained to students in classes preparing them for the WIL placement, so that they can from the outset start identifying how they will be implementing their theoretical knowledge in their daily work during the WIL placement. A further recommendation is that these learning outcomes be incorporated into the assessment forms. If this is done, the student can be assessed in terms of achieving a learning outcome. The manager or supervisor should provide feedback to the student, alerting him or her to the areas in which they have reached competence, and to those in which they need to improve. A detailed assessment form specifying the learning outcomes to be achieved could well improve the degree to which students can incorporate the learning outcomes into the WIL placement.

Limitations to the Study

There were some limitations to this study. The response rate from both the students and hospitality industry was just below 50%, which could question the validity of the study. This study was done anonymously, however, after the completion of this study the researcher felt that it would have been beneficial to follow up the questionnaire with qualitative interviews with the student respondents to establish insight to the reasoning for their responses. A further limitation is that the study is limited to one University of Technology (UoT). A comparison study involving the method in which all the UoTs in South Africa integrate WIL learning outcomes into the WIL placement would establish the best method of ensuring learning outcomes are met.

Future Studies

As an integral part of university curricula, the need for future studies in WIL placements is ongoing. The hospitality industry is an ever-changing environment and therefore future studies are required to ensure learning outcomes for the WIL component of the curriculum is meeting the demands of the hospitality industry.

A future study is recommended into assessment of students on WIL placements from the hospitality industry's perspective. The hospitality industry is driven by supply and demand and establishing the best ways to assess the students from their perspective will encourage an improved relationship between the student, the establishment and the academic institution. Technology plays an important part of everyday life. A future study is required to establish ways in which the assessment can be converted from a paper assessment to a digital assessment, a recommendation mentioned by both an industry and student respondent in this study.

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