STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING IN TOURISM MANAGEMENT: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

Research Article

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Abstract

A South African University of Technology (UoT) curriculum was evaluated in this study to determine its effectiveness on students enrolled in a National Diploma in Tourism Management, aiming to establish if it significantly impacts their WIL experiences. The study collected data from 106 graduates, selected via a non-probability sample, using a descriptive, quantitative approach. Based on their responses, insight was gained into the tourism curriculum and its impact on their WIL experience, allowing for evaluating the curriculum's relevance, expediency, and ability to equip graduates with the essential skills required for the tourism industry. However, graduates reported a gap in technological training, particularly in tourism management systems, which are critical for efficient operational performance within the tourism sector. The study results highlight areas for curriculum enhancement to better align educational outcomes with industry requirements.

Keywords: Tourism Curriculum, Higher Educational Institutions, Skills, Work Integrated Learning.

1. Introduction

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) programs are integral to educational curricula worldwide, allowing students to translate theoretical knowledge into practical experience (Engelbrecht, 2017). These programs enhance learning flexibility, moving beyond traditional classroom settings to foster real-world applications of academic content (Dikilitas & Fructuoso, 2023). The South African tourism industry, a significant driver of national economic growth, intensifies the need for structured educational programs that produce skilled, job-ready graduates (Kyrylov, Hranovska, Boiko, Kwilinski & Boiko, 2020). Therefore, the South African government has mandated skills development within academic curricula, emphasising the importance of WIL for students across various sectors (Govender & Wait, 2017). Research indicates that a persistent divide exists between academic education and the practical demands of WIL, particularly regarding technological competencies and effective communication skills (Dikilitas & Fructuoso, 2023).

This study aimed to evaluate the tourism management curriculum at a South African UoT and assess its impact on students' WIL experiences. Despite some gaps identified in the study, the UoT's curricula appear to prepare students for WIL adequately. Among the challenges students faced were insufficient training on job functions, inadequate knowledge of work duties, and the inability to comprehend technological systems (e.g., Galileo, Amadeus). Thus, this study is justified not only to improve the educational experience of tourism management students but also to support economic development and workforce readiness in the tourism industry. By offering insights into effective curriculum design and WIL implementation.

Addressing these gaps requires robust collaboration between industry and academia to co-create a curriculum encompassing industry-relevant skills, including sustainability competencies, a growing requirement in tourism (Franklin, Halvorson & Brown, 2023).

Despite WIL's critical role, educational institutions frequently face challenges in developing content with specific, outcome-focused learning goals that effectively enhance these practical skills (Aarons, 2019). A disconnect between industry needs and academic content often hinders the development of industry-ready graduates, highlighting the need for stronger collaboration in curriculum design (Franklin et al., 2023). A well-rounded educational framework integrating practical training and relevant content better prepares students for the dynamic demands of the tourism industry (Matsoso & Benedict, 2020). The modern job markets stresses the importance of technical and soft skills in cultivating essential attributes like communication, teamwork, and critical thinking, which are vital for success in professional environments (Anderson & Sanga, 2018; Daniels, Tichaawa & Abrahams, 2022). Moreover, practical learning prepares students to excel in a competitive job market by equipping them with essential knowledge and skills that enhance employability and professional growth (Bello, Kamanga & Jamu, 2019; Komşu, 2024). Adaptability and self-awareness are especially important for tourism professionals in a rapidly evolving industry, where those who adjust to emerging requirements are best positioned to seize new opportunities (Stoyanova-Bozhkova, Paskova & Buhalis, 2020; Hashimy, Jahromi, Hamza, Naaz, Nyamwero & Basavarajappa, 2023; Mizrak, 2023). Nonetheless, many graduates struggle with gaps in work experience and lack awareness of employability skills necessary for career progression (Wakelin-Theron, Ukpere & Spowart, 2018).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Tourism Education

Tourism education rapidly evolves globally and in South Africa. As the industry grows, there is a pressing need for well-structured educational programs to develop a skilled workforce essential for the sector's success (Kyrylov et al., 2020; Daniels et al., 2022). In developing countries, it can bridge the gap between industry needs and academic training (Paudyal, 2019). The development of the tourism industry in South Africa brought about the introduction of travel training programmes in the 1980s. In the 1990s, tourism management programmes were implemented in South Africa (Razack, 2017). In 2006, tourism was introduced as a subject at the high school level in South Africa. By 2015, there were 2,901 schools offering tourism as a subject (Booyens, 2020), which has steadily progressed, currently offering tourism as a higher education qualification at various accredited traditional universities, universities of technology, technical colleges and many private institutions. According to Engelbrecht, Spencer, and Van Der Bijl (2018), the South African educational system comprises Basic Education, Higher Education and Technical Vocational Education and Training. According to the Council of Higher Education (CHE, 2022) website, the following educational authorities play a pivotal role in South Africa with the following impacting tourism education and training:

• South African Qualification Authority Act, No. 58 of 1995

• Higher Education Act, No. 101 of 1997

• Skills Development Act, No. 94 of 1998

• National Qualification Framework Act, No. 67 of 2008

• The Higher Education Qualification Sub-Framework

Relevant qualifications require active involvement from industry stakeholders, particularly in higher education, to address challenges related to educational quality and curriculum relevance (Iskakova, Rakhimberdinova, Alybaev, Smagulova & Nurkenova, 2023; Razack, 2017). According to Govender and Wait (2017), South African higher education institutions have been challenged by the tourism industry to produce students of a high calibre. However, Booyens (2020) highlighted a significant challenge within the South African tourism education system. It is perceived that graduates encounter tremendous difficulty in entering the tourism workforce even with a tourism qualification. This is due to the poor collaboration between higher educational institutions and industry stakeholders (Booyens, 2020). McLeod (2017) stated that a person's learning is based on four influences that affect how they interpret information and that these influences could be categorised into four stages of a learning cycle. By gaining (1) concrete experience, students might be able to open their minds to new experiences without preconceived notions, (2) reflect on a new experience, observing life from different perspectives, (3) abstract conceptualisation, in which observations are logically put into theoretical frameworks, and (4) active experimentation, in which these theories are applied to problem-solving and decision-making. The author further suggested that educational institutions must ensure they find the correct curricular design and implementation to impact the students' learning ability positively. Manolis, Burns, Assudani and Chinta (2013) concur with McLeod and confirm that Kolb's learning model is ideal for student learning outcomes.

According to Tourism Trends and Policies (2018), governmental agencies need to support tourism education through funding, planning, and coordination for a country's tourism sector to thrive. Educational institutions are tasked with producing high-calibre graduates with theoretical knowledge and practical skills (Maftuna, 2023). However, Wakelin-Theron et al. (2018) assert South Africa's unemployment rate is an enthralling concern, and the relationship between higher education institutions, the graduates they yield, and the tourism industry should be assessed. Tourism management curriculums must develop critical thinking, adaptability, and a positive mindset (Şimşek & Kalıpçı, 2022). Engaging a competent workforce not only has a decisive influence on the economic growth of South Africa but also assists in establishing the country within the global tourism market and is essential for the progression of the tourism industry (Makumbirofa & Saayman, 2018).

2.2. The Link between Tourism Education and Industry Needs

A curriculum's effectiveness requires academics to broaden their perception of industry requirements (Pang, Wong, Leung & Coombes, 2019), which calls for curriculum designers to prioritise essential modules so that the tourism curriculum meets industry standards (Wang, Ayres & Huyton, 2010; Aarons, 2019). As Susaeta (2020) and Hyasat (2022) argue, a lack of essential skills could impede career opportunities, leading to a significant gap between academic curricula and industry expectations, thereby resulting in a decline in graduate employability in South Africa's tourism sector (Wakelin-Theron et al., 2018). Aarons (2019) suggests continuous curriculum evaluation is necessary to integrate new industry developments and accommodate diverse learning styles. Yang, Partlow, Anand and Shukla (2014) and Matsoso and Benedict (2020) maintain that it is essential for academics to be well-informed of current industry requirements and adjust their curricula as some concepts may be outdated and irrelevant. This necessitates innovative and flexible learning approaches to meet evolving workforce demands (Lourenço, Li, Ren & Cheng, 2022). According to Komşu (2024) and Hsu, Xiao and Chen (2017), tourism education must cultivate adaptable graduates with skills tailored to workplace roles. Foundational skills like communication, problem-solving, and entrepreneurship are increasingly important for graduates (Maftuna, 2023). Bello et al. (2019)

further state that incorporating transferable skills, including data literacy, is crucial for competitiveness in a data-driven market.

Considering that technological advancements are transforming the tourism industry and improving productivity, education must actively engage students to prepare them for these encounters (Buhalis, 2020). One of the most challenging aspects is the gap between theoretical approaches and practical applications. In theoretical research, several advanced models and frameworks have been developed within academia, but these theories rarely address practical issues. Hence, leading the industry to source strategic and realistic technological approaches from commercial research firms, limiting employment opportunities for graduates (Tushabe & Murimi, 2021). Improved communication is required between academics and industry specialists to align curricula with industry standards to bridge the curriculum's technological gaps (Mesuwini & Mokoena, 2023; Spadaro, Pirlone, Bruno, Saba, Poggio & Bruzzone, 2022). Furthermore, an important component of bridging the skill gap is including policymakers and researchers in creating a monitoring tool that observes industry trends and facilitates partnerships between academia and industry (Affilia, Komariyah & Efwinda, 2023). Collaboration among academia, industry, policymakers, and researchers is perhaps one of the best ways to deal with these challenges and develop industry-ready graduates to contribute to a knowledge-based economy (Tushabe & Murimi, 2021). Despite recommendations for curriculum innovation, challenges persist in aligning academic training with industry expectations.

Among the contributing factors is the inconsistency between graduates' skills and industry needs, inadequate support and limited resources (Affilia et al., 2023; Mesuwini & Mokoena, 2023). As a result, graduates still struggle to find jobs in many ways due to a lack of matching skills (Tushabe & Murimi, 2021). The tourism industry requires a skilled workforce capable of delivering exceptional service (Krušković, 2023). Employees must be resourceful, flexible, and customer-centric to thrive (Bello et al., 2019; Hassanein & Özgit, 2022). Therefore, addressing the development of essential skills is crucial for the industry's growth and sustainability (Bello et al., 2019). Critical Thinking (CT) is essential for effective learning and adaptability (Alsaleh, 2020). Integrating CT into the curricula can significantly enhance students' cognitive and creative abilities, equipping them with the complexities of the modern workplace (Daniels et al., 2022). In addition to CT, self-management strategies are vital for balancing personal and professional responsibilities, thereby improving workplace performance (Jiang, Chen & Lei, 2023; Mesuwini & Mokoena, 2023). These strategies foster efficient goal pursuit and adaptability in overcoming challenges. It combines the personal qualities of the individual with a behavioural transformation process. Moreover, students with higher levels of self-management skills are more likely to succeed academically and be more adaptable to change in the future (Al-Abyadh & Abdel Azeem, 2022). Employers are increasingly seeking graduates who are not only academically competent but also innovative and equipped with the professional skills necessary for leadership (Lötter & Jacobs, 2020).

3. Methodology

This study employed a purposive sampling method, targeting predetermined groups of participants relevant to the research objectives. A descriptive, quantitative research approach was adopted to systematically investigate the impact of the tourism management curriculum on graduates' skills and knowledge. The quantitative research approach was relevant as it allowed for investigating many graduates' perceptions regarding the academic skills learned and their application in real-world scenarios. The rationale for choosing tourism management graduates who completed their WIL training was to gain an overview of the curriculum and how effectively the graduates operate in the tourism industry. The quantitative research

methodology was particularly appropriate for this study, as it facilitated the analysis of many responses to derive meaningful conclusions regarding the participants' experiences and perspectives.

The researcher used an online questionnaire to collect data for this study and anticipated that the collected numerical data would produce a fair outcome that could be generalised to the larger population. A non-probability sampling method was utilised to select a sample of 300 tourism management graduates from the selected South African UoT, specifically those who registered for the National Diploma in Tourism Management and completed their Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) program between 2015 and 2019. The researcher accessed a comprehensive list of tourism graduates who completed their WIL training during the period obtained from the institution's Examination Department. All 300 eligible graduates were invited to participate in the study. A total of 106 responses were collected, of which 62 were female tourism graduates and 44 were male. The researcher also considered the current employment status of the participants and the current employment sector. Data were collected using an online questionnaire designed to gather quantitative data, which enabled the analysis of specific variables pertinent to the research questions. The expectation was that the numerical data collected would yield reliable outcomes that could be generalised to the broader population of tourism graduates. The quantitative raw data were analysed using the latest version of the statistical software SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 26). Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were rigorously adhered to.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Profile of Respondents

The data on the profile of respondents is presented in Table 1 and offers valuable insights into the composition and career outcomes of Tourism Management graduates. The gender distribution is relatively balanced, with a slight majority of females (58.5%) compared to males (41.5%), reflecting a relatively inclusive representation within the tourism program. Most students (69.8%) selected tourism as their first choice of study, showing a strong initial interest in the field. In comparison, the remaining 30.2% may have joined with alternative priorities, which could impact long-term commitment to tourism careers. The distribution of graduates over 2015–2019 shows a steady increase, particularly in later years, suggesting possible growth in program enrolment or improved graduation rates. This trend provides a foundation for longitudinal analyses to assess the curriculum's evolving impact. Work Integrated Learning (WIL) placements were diverse, with tour operators (21.7%) and accommodation (15.1%) as primary sectors. However, lower placements in specialised areas such as tourist attractions (4.7%) and information centres (4.7%) may limit graduates' exposure to niche tourism roles.

Expanding WIL opportunities in underrepresented sectors could foster a broader skill set and industry awareness. The employment outcomes indicate that only 24.5% of graduates remain within the tourism industry, while the majority (75.5%) work in other fields, raising concerns about alignment between the curriculum and tourism-specific job retention. This outcome may reflect either the transferability of skills to other sectors or a lack of adequate job opportunities within tourism. Regarding work experience, 50% of graduates have between 1–3 years of experience, but a notable 38.7% have less than one year, pointing to challenges in securing long-term roles within the industry. Additionally, the brief duration of most WIL placements (86.8% lasting six months or less) could limit students' hands-on experience, particularly in complex operational skills. Extending WIL placements or creating more

immersive experiences may strengthen graduates' practical expertise, addressing a critical gap in career preparedness.

Table 1: *Characteristics of the respondents*

Students' information		Number	%
Gender	Male	44	41.5
	Female	62	58.5
Students' preference for 'tourism' as their first choice of study	Yes	74	69.8
	No	32	30.2
Year in which graduates completed the National Diploma in Tourism Management	2015	17	16
	2016	15	14.2
	2017	18	17
	2018	26	24.5
	2019	30	28.3
Sector in which graduates completed their WIL	Municipalities	7	6.6
	Accommodation	16	15.1
	Game reserves	7	6.6
	Tourist attractions	5	4.7
	Tourist information centre	5	4.7
	Events Management	10	9.4
	Airlines	15	14.2
	Tour Operator	23	21.7
	Travel agency	14	13.2
	Other	4	3.8
Current sector of employment	Tourism industry	26	24.5
	Other industry	80	75.5
Graduates' years of work experience	Less than 1 year	41	38.7
	1 to 3 years	53	50
	4 to 6 years	12	11.3
Duration of WIL	0 to 6 months	92	86.8
	More than 6 months	14	13.2

4.2. Basic skills required by the tourism industry

Table 2 displays graduate responses rating their agreement on how well the curriculum addressed various skills using a 5-point Likert scale, where '5' is 'fully addressed' and '1' is 'not addressed'. Findings show that organisational awareness (mean=4.22), working effectively with others (mean=4.18), communicating effectively (mean=4.17), problem-solving (mean=4.02), and social responsibility and accountability (mean=4.01) were the most represented skills. Conversely, analysing data and using technology (mean=3.84) and developing initiative and enterprise (mean=3.83) were perceived as least represented. The subsequent data will further examine this skill set component.

Table 2: *The extent to which the curriculum addressed the following skills that graduates required during their WIL*

Skills	1 Not addressed	2 Slightly addressed	3 Unsure	4 Reasonably addressed	5 Fully addressed	Mean
Thinking Critically						**3.91**
Observation	2.8	14.2	10.4	32.1	40.6	3.93
Analysis	3.8	13.2	11.3	36.8	34.9	3.86
Interpretation	.9	14.2	8.5	43.4	33.0	3.93
Reflection	3.8	7.5	19.8	37.7	31.1	3.85
Evaluation	3.8	9.4	11.3	32.1	43.4	4.02
Self-Awareness						**3.97**
Life-long learning	6.6	11.3	11.3	32.1	38.7	3.85
Career management	7.5	13.2	12.3	33.0	34.0	3.73
Higher level of thinking	2.8	14.2	8.5	29.2	45.3	4.00
Self-confidence	2.8	10.4	10.4	21.7	54.7	4.15
Self-motivation and perseverance	3.8	10.4	8.5	22.6	54.7	4.14
Communicating Effectively						**4.17**
Verbal communication	1.9	7.5	1.9	31.1	57.5	4.35
Public speaking	2.8	10.4	2.8	34.0	50.0	4.18
Giving and receiving feedback	2.8	8.5	4.7	34.0	50.0	4.20
Meeting participation	7.5	8.5	5.7	34.0	44.3	3.99
Written communication	5.7	10.4	4.7	19.8	59.4	4.17
Working Effectively with Others						**4.18**
Task collaboration and teamwork	0.9	8.5	2.8	25.5	62.3	4.40
Cultural and diversity awareness	2.8	8.5	7.5	23.6	57.5	4.25
Influencing others	3.8	12.3	7.5	30.2	46.2	4.03
Relationship building	1.9	9.4	6.6	24.5	57.5	4.26
Conflict resolution	8.5	8.5	6.6	29.2	47.2	3.98
Analysing Data and Using Technology						**3.84**
Information management	4.7	11.3	5.7	30.2	48.1	4.06
Numerical skills	5.7	14.2	7.5	39.6	33.0	3.80
Technological skills	7.5	14.2	8.5	26.4	43.4	3.84
Research skills	8.5	16.0	9.4	32.1	34.0	3.67
Problem-Solving						**4.02**
Decision-making skills	2.8	9.4	6.6	35.8	45.3	4.11
Analysing situations	2.8	10.4	6.6	42.5	37.7	4.02
Diagnosing problems	4.7	10.4	10.4	42.5	32.1	3.87
Identifying solutions	2.8	11.3	6.6	30.2	49.1	4.11
Self-Management						**3.97**
Self-regulation	6.6	8.5	6.6	33.0	45.3	4.02
Stress tolerance	7.5	14.2	9.4	38.7	30.2	3.70

Work/life balance	8.5	10.4	7.5	32.1	41.5	3.88
Time management	3.8	9.4	1.9	22.6	62.3	4.30
Social Responsibility and Accountability						**4.01**
Social responsibility	8.5	11.3	9.4	34.9	35.8	3.78
Personal accountability	6.6	10.4	6.6	34.0	42.5	3.95
Personal ethics	7.5	8.5	2.8	35.8	45.3	4.03
Social awareness and empathy	5.7	7.5	7.5	35.8	43.4	4.04
Honesty and integrity	4.7	5.7	5.7	26.4	57.5	4.26
Developing Initiative and Enterprise						**3.83**
Entrepreneurship	6.6	13.2	10.4	31.1	38.7	3.82
Initiative	5.7	13.2	10.4	38.7	32.1	3.72
Lateral thinking	7.5	11.3	11.3	34.0	35.8	3.79
Creativity	5.7	9.4	8.5	30.2	46.2	4.02
Change management	7.5	13.2	9.4	31.1	38.7	3.80
Organisational Awareness						**4.22**
Developing professionalism	8.5	6.6	2.8	25.5	56.6	4.15
Efficiency	5.7	8.5	3.8	30.2	51.9	4.14
Multi-tasking	2.8	7.5	4.7	27.4	57.5	4.29
Knowledge of organisation rules and regulations	2.8	8.5	4.7	21.7	62.3	4.32
Cultural knowledge	4.7	6.6	5.7	26.4	56.6	4.24

Graduates were asked to indicate how much the curriculum addressed the required skills during their Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). A 5-point Likert scale was used to assess this, with categories ranging from "not addressed" (1) to "fully addressed" (5). The discussion of the results focuses on the mean scores obtained for each skill area.

4.2.1 Organisational awareness

Higher education institutions are crucial for shaping the future workforce. They are expected to equip graduates with the necessary skills and competencies to excel in today's competitive job market. An overall average mean score of (mean=4.22) deemed this skill as 'reasonably addressed' to 'fully addressed'. The data confirms that graduates perceived those specific skills, such as knowledge of organisation rules and regulations (mean=4.32), multi-tasking (mean=4.29) and cultural knowledge (mean=4.24), were well incorporated into the tourism curriculum. Moreover, skills such as developing professionalism (mean=4.15) and efficiency (mean=4.14) were also evident in the curriculum. Mahajan, Aruldhas, Sharma, Badyal and Singh (2016) argue that formal training is essential for graduates before they enter organisations, as it aids their integration into the corporate world. A well-structured curriculum should incorporate essential skills, mannerisms, and goal-setting strategies (Mahajan et al., 2016). Student engagement often boosts self-efficacy in training programs, leading to greater confidence in handling complex interviews and demonstrating skills in the workplace. This can be achieved by enhancing cultural and social competencies alongside academic skills and fostering a commitment to lifelong learning (Ibrahim & Jaaffar, 2017).

4.2.2 Working effectively with others

Table 2 highlights that the skill of working effectively with others was perceived to be well-represented in the curriculum. An overall average mean score of (mean=4.18) was obtained, which indicates a 'reasonably addressed' to 'fully addressed' response. The data shows that graduates felt prepared to engage with working environment members due to their training in this skill. In particular, the skills that were most represented in the curriculum included task collaboration and teamwork (mean=4.40), relationship building (mean=4.26), and cultural and diversity awareness (mean=4.25) as elements that prepared them for the working environment, thereby bridging the gap between what is taught in the classroom and what is required by industry. Lastly, graduates agreed that influencing others (mean=4.03) and conflict resolution (mean=3.98) were vital elements associated with working effectively with others, and these skills were also addressed in the curriculum. A key employability attribute for graduates in a global, multicultural workplace is the ability to collaborate effectively, relying on non-technical or soft skills. Graduates in Australia have struggled to work with culturally and linguistically diverse individuals due to inadequate incorporation of these skills in their curriculum (Schech, Kelton, Carati & Kingsmill, 2017). Integrating soft skills into graduates' education is crucial for enhancing teamwork, adapting to globalisation, fostering cross-cultural dialogue, and retaining talent in the workplace. This will positively impact their career success (Succi & Canovi, 2020).

4.2.3 Communicating effectively

Regarding communicating effectively, graduates were asked to rate their level of agreement concerning the elements that make up this skill set. An overall average mean score of (mean=4.17) was identified, which indicates a 'reasonably addressed' to 'fully addressed' response. According to the data, graduates were satisfied with the level of training that was attributed to this skill, with graduates emphasising that a high representation was made in the curriculum with regards to skills such as good verbal communication (mean=4.35), the ability to give and receive feedback (mean=4.20), public speaking (mean=4.18) and written communication (mean=4.17). Kenayathulla, Ahmad and Idris (2019) contend that modern employers expect graduates to possess essential academic and personal skills. A lack of these employability skills has been identified as a key gap between academia, training, and the workplace (Suarta et al., 2017). A graduate's verbal and written communication proficiency is the foundation of success in academia and the workplace. These skills facilitate effective interactions and enhance workplace efficiency (Khan, Mishra, Lin & Doyle, 2017).

4.2.4 Problem Solving

Problem-solving skills are vital for graduates and are highly valued by organisations worldwide. This skill set encompasses identifying, analysing, and addressing challenges to improve employability. As a result, there is a strong emphasis on assessing graduates' problem-solving abilities and how these skills are integrated into educational curricula. The average mean score was (mean=4.02), indicating responses ranged from 'reasonably addressed' to 'fully addressed.' Graduates noted that problem-solving was a valuable tool in the tourism industry, enabling independent task performance. Skills such as decision-making (mean=4.11), identifying solutions (mean=4.11), analysing situations (mean=4.02), and diagnosing problems (mean=3.87) were viewed as well-represented in the curriculum. Care, Scoular and Griffin (2016) note that the global labour force has shifted its focus from academic qualifications to

individual skills. Organisations are now prioritising new employees' abilities in diagnosing problems, solving them, and analysing solutions in the modern workplace (Care et al., 2016). To succeed in today's workplace, graduates need problem-solving skills, strong interpersonal communication, and a customer service orientation. Integrating these competencies into the curriculum prepares them for modern professional challenges (McMurray, Dutton, McQuaid & Richard, 2016; Jackson, 2015).

4.2.5 Social responsibility and accountability

Social responsibility and accountability have gained momentum in educational and socio-economic fields, contributing to sustainable business growth and community engagement. Graduates were asked to rate the level to which this skill was incorporated into their curriculum. An average mean score of (mean=4.01) indicates that this skill was 'reasonably to fully addressed.' According to Table 2, graduates highlighted honesty and integrity (mean=4.26) as essential components of the tourism curriculum. They also viewed social awareness and empathy (mean=4.04) and personal ethics (mean=4.03) as crucial elements adequately covered. Personal accountability (mean=3.95) and social responsibility (mean=3.78) were recognised as fundamental aspects of the curriculum, underscoring the importance of accountability in the tourism industry. Industry expectations have changed, with organisations now requiring new employees to have the essential knowledge and skills to improve efficiency and competitiveness (Barrena-Martínez, López-Fernández, Márquez-Moreno & Romero-Fernández, 2014). Integrating modules on social responsibility, ethics, and sustainability into curricula develops graduates with social awareness and accountability, enabling them to work with integrity (Barrena-Martínez et al., 2014; Fleacă, 2017).

4.2.6 Self-Management

A graduate's ability to manage their career and the success they will achieve is primarily based on their capacity to self-manage their academic and working careers. The data in Table 2 offered insight into the graduate's opinions on these skills, with an overall mean score of (mean=3.97), with many emphasising that time management (mean=4.30) and self-regulation (mean=4.02) were self-management skills that were most represented in the tourism management curriculum. Skills related to a balance between work/life (mean=3.88) and the ability to manage stress (mean=3.70) were also represented (to a lesser extent) in the curriculum. Clements and Kamau (2018) note that graduates face numerous challenges in securing employment in today's complex labour market. To succeed, individuals must be self-sufficient and responsible for their career growth. Key to employability is career management competencies, such as maintaining work/life balance, practising self-regulation, and balancing job acquisition with career success (Jackson & Wilton, 2016). The attainment of such proficiencies assists graduates to be successful within both the academic and working domain, thus positively influencing a graduate's self-development and stress tolerance (Lent, Ezeofor, Morrison, Penn & Ireland, 2016).

4.2.7 Self-Awareness

While self-awareness is recognised, there is limited evidence regarding how educators actively promote this learning in the classroom. Nevertheless, most graduates in this study indicated that the curriculum effectively addressed the concept of self-awareness. The overall mean score was (mean=3.97), indicating responses that were 'reasonably' to 'fully addressed.'

The data revealed that self-awareness skills were facilitated, with graduates rating self-confidence as the highest (mean=4.15), followed closely by self-motivation and perseverance (mean=4.14) and higher-level thinking (mean=4.00). Bobanovic and Grzinic (2019) suggest that educators use creative methods to engage students in learning. Similarly, Dole, Bloom and Kowalske (2016) argue that students can develop a progressive mindset instead of a stagnant one. Engaging in learning activities helps students overcome obstacles and boost confidence (Razack, 2017; Law & Rowe, 2019). Fostering a trusting environment promotes risk-taking in personal growth, while constructive feedback enhances self-awareness (Law & Rowe, 2019).

4.2.8 Thinking critically

Respondents were surveyed on how well the curriculum addressed critical thinking skills. Results in Table 2 show that graduates generally felt the curriculum adequately covered this category. The overall average mean score of (mean=3.91) indicates responses from 'reasonably addressed' to 'fully addressed.' Respondents were satisfied with critical thinking components, particularly evaluation (mean=4.02) as the most essential, followed by observation (mean=3.93) and interpretation (mean=3.93). Analysis (mean=3.86) and reflection (mean=3.85) were also important in developing these skills. Critical thinking is a globally recognised skill for lifelong learning and career advancement. It empowers students to interpret data drawn from the vast array of available information, equipping them with the expertise needed to engage in the learning process with a deeper understanding (Schmaltz, Jansen & Wenckowski, 2017). Murawski (2014) emphasised that critical thinking skills are valuable, enabling students to become creators and evaluators of new information.

4.2.9 Analysing data and using technology

The integration of technology and data analysis is essential for organisations globally. Therefore, it's crucial to evaluate the quality of technological content in curricula rather than merely quantifying the tools or programmes instructed to students. Analysing data and using technology was perceived as well represented in the curriculum (mean=3.84). In particular, the skills that were perceived to be most represented in the curriculum with regards to analysing data and using technology were asserting that information management (mean=4.06), technological skills (mean=3.84), numerical skills (mean=3.80), and research skills (mean=3.67). Infante-Moro, Infante-Moro and Gallardo-Pérez (2019) highlight the importance of technological functions in organisational structures worldwide, leading higher education institutions to incorporate specialised training into their curricula. Integrating computer and Internet technologies enhances communication and overall educational effectiveness, fostering lifelong learning (Fathema, Shannon & Ross, 2015). The quality of technology and its curriculum implementation are crucial for developing students' employability skills (Lei, 2010).

4.2.10 Developing Initiative and Enterprise

The capacity for innovation is a crucial metric for economic and social advancement. Developing graduates' creative thinking and entrepreneurial skills is essential for their competitiveness in a changing job market. Equipping them with these abilities will bolster their individual prospects and contribute to broader societal progress and economic resilience. The data in Table 2 shows an overall mean score of (mean=3.82) and depicts that creativity

(mean=4.02) and entrepreneurship skills (mean=3.82) are well integrated into the tourism curriculum, preparing adaptable graduates for the evolving corporate landscape. Change management (mean=3.80), lateral thinking (mean=3.79), and initiative (mean=3.72) are also important components. Entrepreneurial modules are valuable learning tools that enhance all academic programs, regardless of the discipline. These modules aim to enhance graduates' ability to generate wealth through problem-solving and exploring new business opportunities (Edokpolor & Somorin, 2017). In the twenty-first century, an organisation's success relies on an innovative and creative workforce (Shu, Ho & Huang, 2020). The cornerstone of education should equip graduates for a smooth transition into the professional world, fostering creativity, innovative thinking, productivity, and a strong desire to succeed (Edokpolor & Somorin, 2017). With the number of graduates exceeding available job opportunities, these modules will help graduates become self-reliant and explore start-up ventures, contributing to their country's economic development (Rasiah, Somasundram & Tee, 2019).

4.3. Activities undertaken during the graduate's WIL placement

Graduates were asked to indicate the extent to which various activities undertaken during their Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) placements were completed. A 5-point Likert scale was used for this assessment, with categories ranging from "never" (1) to "always" (5). The discussion of the results is centred on the mean scores obtained for each activity.

Table 3: *Activities undertaken during WIL placement*

Activity	1 Never	2 Sometimes	3 Unsure	4 Often	5 Always	Mean
Undertake work relevant to the learning outcomes	2.8	14.2	7.5	48.1	27.4	3.83
Undertake work relevant to the goals of the organisation you were placed in	3.8	10.4	14.2	32.1	39.6	3.93
Contributed valuable ideas to the organisation	13.2	10.4	17.0	22.6	36.8	3.59
Applied theories you had learned in class	3.8	17.9	8.5	25.5	44.3	3.89
Applied or developed skills you had learned in class	3.8	14.2	9.4	28.3	44.3	3.95
Critically evaluated theories you had learned in class	7.5	15.1	12.3	22.6	42.5	3.77

The findings from the respondents' ratings regarding their engagement in specific activities during work-integrated learning (WIL) present several implications for enhancing educational practices in tourism management. With mean scores indicating a solid engagement in applying classroom skills (Mean=3.95) and aligning work with organisational goals (Mean=3.93), graduates are experiencing a positive integration of theoretical knowledge and practical application. This aligns with Henderson and Trede's (2017) assertion that WIL effectively merges theory with practice, providing students with authentic workplace experiences. However, while the data reflect reasonably high engagement levels, there is still room for improvement. The mean score for critically evaluating classroom theories (Mean=3.77)

suggests that while graduates apply theoretical concepts, there is potential for deeper engagement and critical analysis to enhance the reflection process. Furthermore, the lower score for contributing valuable ideas to the organisation (Mean=3.59) indicates a gap in the students' confidence or opportunities to innovate within their workplaces. This points to a need for educational institutions to create environments that encourage creativity and active participation during WIL.

Ajjawi et al. (2020) highlighted that reflective practice is critical for maximising the benefits of WIL. Students should be prompted to consider their personal goals and learning outcomes, which would enhance their professional development. Institutions may need to incorporate structured reflection opportunities, enabling students to assess their experiences and link them to their academic learning. Additionally, Luk and Chan (2021) emphasise that recognising unplanned learning outcomes is crucial for fostering creativity and self-efficacy. However, these findings contradict those of Twyford and Dean (2024), who argue that while reflective practice is crucial in experiential learning, the challenge of integrating reflection into teaching is only partially understood. It does not facilitate the critical questioning of experience, often missing opportunities for learners to analyse their experiences and address uncertainties essential for genuine reflection. Dean, Skye, Agostinho and Clements (2012) further suggested that student assessment opinions vary widely. While some found the assessments beneficial, others criticised them as mechanical, easily fabricated, and uncomfortable due to required personal disclosure. Ineffective reflective assessments can hinder learners' potential and create unproductive learning environments. Moreover, the call for revisions in assessment and evaluation strategies for WIL is particularly relevant for students' professional and personal development (Kiriri, 2019).

4.4. New skills graduates learnt during their WIL placement

In the Communication and Interpersonal Skills category, which accounts for 10.1% of the total skills learned, graduates acquired essential communication skills often not emphasised in university curricula. While basic communication theory may be taught, the hands-on practice of customer service, verbal communication, and conflict management is best developed through real-world experience. For example, telephone etiquette, event coordination, and managing quotations are skills typically learned on the job, offering graduates a more nuanced understanding of the tourism industry's customer-facing demands. Additionally, emphasising teamwork, team building, and leadership skills in a practical setting is invaluable as it prepares students for collaboration in diverse, fast-paced environments.

The largest category, Technical and Operational Skills, represents 20.6% of the skills acquired during WIL. These skills are central to the technical and operational aspects of the tourism industry, particularly the use of specialised tools and systems. Students may have limited theoretical knowledge of tourism operations, which may be taught in class, using systems like APEX, reservation systems such as Sabre and Galileo, and tools for data capturing and stock management, which are primarily learned during WIL. These systems are integral to daily operations in the tourism sector, and students gain hands-on experience with them only in a practical environment. The experience gained in these areas is critical for students' immediate employability, as they are equipped with the tools they will use daily in their roles. Integrating relevant digital marketing courses, data analytics training, and practical experience with industry-standard tools is crucial for elevating tourism management programs. This approach ensures that students are thoroughly prepared to navigate the complexities of today's

tourism industry, where a strong digital presence and data-driven decision-making are essential.

In the area of Problem-Solving and Time Management, graduates learned skills crucial for handling the pressures of the tourism industry. This category accounts for 8.3% of the total skills learned. While problem-solving and time management are addressed in university courses, these skills are honed more effectively in real-world situations where students must work under pressure, multitask, and solve complex issues. The ability to work independently, solve problems, and manage time effectively in a fast-paced environment is an essential takeaway from the WIL experience. Additionally, skills like project management and organisational abilities, such as filing and handling human resources tasks, are necessary for graduates entering managerial or supervisory roles in tourism and hospitality.

The Professionalism and Organizational Skills category, which makes up 4.6% of the total skills learned, emphasises the importance of professionalism in a workplace setting. While students learn fundamental administrative concepts in university, such as keeping records, switchboard operation, and reception management, these are typically further enhanced during the WIL experience. Therefore, students may not have deemed this skill set as important as Technical and Operational Skills. Although Professionalism and Organizational skills are essential for ensuring smooth business operations, the emphasis on lifelong learning and developing a professional attitude are outcomes that work-integrated learning facilitates as students experience first-hand the professional environment they will be entering after graduation.

Lastly, Hospitality and Service Skills, representing 4.7%, are essential for graduates entering customer-facing roles in the tourism sector. Skills such as cooking and waitressing are typically learned in practical settings such as hotels, restaurants, or other hospitality environments. Based on the data in Table 1, most students were not placed in the hospitality sector, which may be a potential reason for the lesser percentage depicted in Table 4. While these tasks may be touched upon in academic settings, the WIL experience provides the hands-on training necessary to master them. This category is particularly relevant for graduates pursuing careers in hospitality service-oriented positions, where such practical skills are essential for delivering high-quality customer service.

Table 4: *New skills acquired during WIL*

Skills		Percentage
Communication and Interpersonal Skills	Communication skills, verbal communication, customer service, good verbal communication	1.8
	Conflict management, teamwork, team building, conflict resolution, leadership skills	2.8
	Telephone etiquette, events coordination, and quotations	3.7
	Creativity, cultural awareness	1.8
	Total	**10.1**
Technical and Operational Skills	Computer skills (Microsoft Outlook), IT, business writing skills	3.7
	The use of the APEX system, reservation systems (Sabre, Galileo, Limo Anywhere, Travel Studio), operational skills	11.3

	The use of reservation systems, data capturing, and stock management	5.6
	Total	**20.6**
Problem-solving and Time Management	Working independently, problem-solving, conducting meetings, self-confidence	2.8
	Problem-solving, time management, working under pressure, multitasking	3.7
	Organisational ability, project management, filing (Human resources)	1.8
	Total	**8.3**
Professionalism and Organizational Skills	Administrative skills (keeping of records), switchboard operation, reception management	2.8
	Professionalism, life-long learning	1.8
	Total	**4.6**
Hospitality and Service Skills	Cooking and waitressing	4.7
	Total	**4.7**

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The persistent trend of hospitality and tourism management (HTM) graduates leaving the industry within a decade has contributed to a shortage of skilled professionals. This phenomenon has raised concerns regarding the sector's long-term sustainability and has led to debates about the necessity of HTM programs in higher education institutions (Gong & Jia, 2022). This paper primarily evaluated the tourism management curricula at a South African UoT and its effects on the WIL experiences of the students. Skills development, academic knowledge, and how the students applied their knowledge to the reality of the working environment constituted the key areas of investigation. Key competencies included critical thinking, problem-solving, and self-awareness, which are vital for success in tourism organisations. Graduates demonstrated the ability to analyse, evaluate, and implement necessary workplace measures and confidently interpret data. The data revealed that effective communication, teamwork, initiative, social responsibility, accountability, and organisational awareness enabled them to meet workplace demands. Graduates noted that these competencies were productive during their Work Integrated Learning (WIL) experience. They highlighted the importance of a strong work ethic, emphasising honesty, integrity, and accountability as essential for personal and professional growth, particularly in diverse cultural contexts.

While WIL offers students direct exposure to industry practices, the study revealed that 75.5% of graduates were not employed in the tourism sector, while only 24.5% secured tourism-related positions. The diversity in career trajectories of individuals holding National Diplomas in Tourism highlights the necessity of assessing the curricula's effect on WIL. Still, there appears to be an incongruity between higher education outputs and the market's priorities to foster partnerships and mechanisms for coordinating professional internships (Rêgo, Lourenço, Moreira & Pereira, 2024). However, the barriers to career development in the tourism and hospitality industry have been a subject of considerable attention (Preko & Anyigba, 2024). Potential factors that may influence the high unemployment rate may be the graduates' lack of technical skills. According to the data, technical and operational abilities make up 20.6% of graduates' new abilities when participating in WIL. The results indicated that graduates consider technical and operational competencies essential for success, including proficiency in the APEX and reservation systems (Sabre, Galileo, Limo Anywhere, and Travel

Studio). They highlighted the importance of utilising reservation, data capture, and stock management systems in tourism to foster a productive and collaborative environment. Technology and operations in the tourism business require specialised tools and systems. Theories of tourism operations are constrained, but some concepts may be addressed in class. WIL is the primary way to develop Practical competencies associated with APEX, Sabre, Galileo, data collection and inventory management tools. Digital Transformation encompasses introducing new products and services and facilitating the creation of innovative business models. Integrating digital technologies in education presents an opportunity for the sector to explore revolutionary strategies for student development. Additionally, implementing new learning models aims to enhance teaching and learning processes, aligning them with digital transformation requirements. Furthermore, a thorough analysis of curricula is necessary to ensure they meet the evolving demands of the job market (Rêgo, Lourenço, Moreira & Pereira, 2024).

Higher Educational institutions (HEIs) must prepare students for employment and anticipate and adapt to the emerging skill sets required in the labour market. Findings revealed that 86.8% of the graduates engaged in WIL for six months and expressed satisfaction with this duration, as it enhanced their practical knowledge in the tourist sector and enabled them to assess the curriculum's influence on their WIL performance. Most graduates believed the curriculum effectively covered fundamental skills, aiding their transition into the workforce. Nonetheless, a pertinent issue is the six-month duration of WIL; extending this timeframe may provide students with additional opportunities to obtain specialised skills and training, enhancing their employability (Ziegler, Chipanga & Magoda, 2020).

Enhancing WIL programs is crucial for bridging the gap between academic training and industry requirements. Establishing partnerships with tourism organisations can create tailored WIL opportunities that ensure skills taught in classrooms are applicable in real-world settings. Introducing academic workshops promoting ethics, integrity, and accountability will foster professionalism. Career support and coaching in educational institutions should be enhanced to aid graduates in delivering customised placement and interview preparation. Initiatives that promote entrepreneurship opportunities may empower graduates to pursue their ventures. Revising WIL assessment strategies is also recommended, as evaluating the alignment between theoretical learning and practical skills is better. Moreover, adding reflective assessments and robust feedback mechanisms will elevate program quality and facilitate continuous curricular enhancements. This proactive approach will ensure that graduates remain competitive and contribute to the sector's sustainable growth.

6. Limitations

The study's generalisability is constrained as it was conducted at a single University of Technology (UoT) and assessed only students enrolled in the ND: Tourism Management program. A comparative analysis of all UoT's and traditional universities in South Africa is essential to evaluate the curriculum's efficacy in preparing students for WIL placements. This may influence the results, as different academic institutions may enrol students from varied economic origins, consequently impacting their access to resources, knowledge, and educational experiences. Moreover, pedagogical methods affect student engagement and learning outcomes, whereas differences in curricular content might lead to discrepancies in acquiring academic information and skills. Although the study achieved its objectives of evaluating the tourism curriculum, contributions from both academic and industry stakeholders would have provided a more balanced interpretation of viewpoints. Stakeholders are regarded as having diverse roles in educational development; they affect the strategic direction of

education via curriculum development and assist in performance evaluation through quality management processes.

Also, the results in this study may have been influenced by English proficiency, as most respondents were non-native speakers. If respondents with language difficulties fail to comprehend a question accurately, they may also recall erroneous information, provide wrong judgements, and assign their answers to inappropriate response categories. Further challenges were identified in this study sample due to their geographical locations, outdated student information, unemployment, and limited internet connectivity. Future researchers should also consider this study's limitations and gaps in WIL education and training within the tourism management program and expand the research to encompass WIL programs from diverse educational institutions, assisting graduates to maintain a positive attitude by providing a well-structured course design with industry-specific knowledge, which will support them in the workplace. Moreover, the criteria used by education providers in selecting host organisations for graduate placements should be assessed. Host organisations that lack the necessary resources to develop industry-specific skills may impede graduates' employability. Consequently, examining a host organisation's capacity to enhance a graduate's competencies may yield valuable insights.

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