



Work Integrated Learning as a Strategic Tool for Enhancing Professional Development of Tourism and Hospitality Students

Vikelwa Judith Nomnga, Walter Sisulu University, Email:
vnomnga@wsu.ac.za

This article explores the effectiveness of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) as a strategy to enhance academic performance and practical work experience amongst hospitality students at Walter Sisulu University (WSU) in South Africa. The article is thrust in the interpretive paradigm where the community of practice theory was used to analyse the perception of hospitality students regarding WIL as an education strategy for improving academic performance. A qualitative approach that employs interview schedules was used to purposively identify 15 hospitality students at WSU. These participants were enrolled for a tourism and hospitality course; hence, their perceptions regarding WIL were fundamental in understanding its usefulness. The key findings of this article revealed that WIL has made crucial strides towards equipping hospitality students with practical experience that they balance with theoretical knowledge to enhance their academic performance. However, some participants revealed that the WIL programme exposed them to industry slavery as they are subjected to repeated job routines that are not adequately remunerated. Therefore, the researcher has realised the need for hospitality industry players to increase their supervision role to students on a WIL programme, as this would instil a positive attitude for this experiential learning programme.

Key words: *Work-Integrated Learning; tourism and hospitality; academic performance, employability opportunities*



Introduction

The article explores the effectiveness of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) as a strategy to enhance academic performance and practical work experience amongst hospitality students at Walter Sisulu University (WSU). Work Integrated Learning (WIL) is defined as an educational strategy implemented as a crucial element of a course of study where work-based experiences equip students with the chance to fuse theory with the meaningful practice of work (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018; Jackson, 2015). Reciprocity, or mutual advantages for the student, institution, and workplace host organisation, is critical to effective WIL programs (Fleming, McLachlan & Pretti, 2018). The advantages of participating in WIL (for example, through practicums, internships, or cooperative education) have been thoroughly researched and documented in a variety of areas (Roy and Sykes, 2017; Nguyen & Pham, 2020). In South Africa, WIL is supported under many legal frameworks such as the Skills Development Act of 1998. The act fosters the training of employees and learners, and it supports collaboration between private and public sector institutions.

WIL students give additional labour, which boosts output within the tourism and hospitality industry (Fleming & Hickey, 2013; Sotiriadou, 2011). Furthermore, when WIL students are in the workplace, they should ideally engage in authentic activities that reflect the profession's everyday practices and contribute to the firm's smooth operation (Nyanjom, Goh & Yang, 2020). As they work alongside professionals in what has been defined as a community of practice, a socio-cultural entity, they get absorbed not just in the day-to-day duties but also in the social context of the workplace (Lave & Wenger, 1991). During their interactions with one another, community members generate and share knowledge. WIL students can learn "what to do" and "how to do" through witnessing their coworkers' actions as well as conversing with their workplace bosses and colleagues (Bandura, 1977; Billett, 2001). These principles are largely concerned with the integration of the 'newcomer' (i.e., the student) into an existing community of practice. Surprisingly, no consideration has been made in the theorising of student enculturation into a community of practice or of whether the newcomer may cause changes in the dynamics of evolution of this community of practice.

For the mutual benefit of students and companies, WIL links academic programs offered by universities of technology with workplace practices. Work Integrated Learning is also considered as a way for universities of technology to create the graduate skills, knowledge, and qualities that they want their graduates to have after completing their university degrees (Leong & Kavanagh, 2013). Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) was created to help students improve their capacity to apply information and skills, as well as acquire competence, to meet the demands of real-world issues (Bosch, 2013). WIL also allows students to learn by doing, allowing them to comprehend their role in the workplace and to apply their skills and knowledge to manage work obligations. Furthermore, according to Elijido-Ten (2014:216), "Work Integrated Learning programs promote holistic adaptive learning by allowing students to go through the whole learning cycle of experiencing, learning, thinking, and acting."



With all the benefits WIL can provide, Ori (2014) warns of the barriers students face that range from diverse backgrounds, limited skills and relevant knowledge. Besides students being placed into WIL programmes, the training institutions such as hotels, lodges and restaurants are not increasing in numbers, which is a serious challenge for many hospitality students eligible for placement. Given this background, this article has the following objectives:

- To assess the effectiveness of WIL to enhance academic performance and practical work experience amongst hospitality students at WSU.
- To examine the perceptions of hospitality students about WIL as a skills development imperative.
- To assess the barriers facing hospitality students when enrolled for WIL in hotels.

Methodology

The article explores the effectiveness of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) as a strategy to enhance academic performance and practical work experience amongst hospitality students at Walter Sisulu University (WSU). The study used an interpretive paradigm where the community of practice theory was used to analyse the perception of hospitality students regarding WIL as an education strategy for improving academic performance. A qualitative approach that employs interview schedules was used to purposively identify 15 hospitality students at WSU. These participants were enrolled for a tourism and hospitality course; hence, their perceptions regarding WIL were fundamental in understanding its usefulness. Both female and male students participated in this study. The interviews lasted about 15 minutes each and consent was sought from students before they participated in the interviews. The data from the unstructured interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically presented using themes from the research objective of this article.

Theoretical context

This article identified the community of practices (COP) to explain the significance of WIL as an education and practical learning programme among hospitality students at WSU.

Community of Practise

The concept of 'community of practice' (COP) was first proposed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger to comprehend learning in the workplace. Learning, according to Lave and Wenger (1991), occurs because of human social interaction. Their main thrust is that "learning, thinking and knowing are relations among people engaged in activity in, with and arising from the socially and culturally structured world" (p. 51). Learning takes place in the interactions



between COP members as part of a social learning system. Members can contribute to the community's activities in a variety of ways, have varied responsibilities, and have diverse perspectives on how the community operates. The practice of a COP is defined by the knowledge that is generated and communicated, as well as the artefacts that are utilised (e.g., words, tools, concepts, tales, and papers) (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). Situated learning changes the focus away from the learner as an individual and toward the necessity of social interaction rather than merely learning by performing or finishing certain tasks (Fuller, Hodkinson, & Unwin, 2005; Lave & Wenger, 1991). When students interact with coworkers informally, they receive access to tacit knowledge that they might not have had access to in a more formal setting. Social interactions in the workplace also provide an opportunity for students to learn about a profession's culture, attitudes and behaviours (dispositional knowledge) (Billet, 2009; Martin Rees & Edwards 2011).

Lave and Wenger (1991) investigated an apprenticeship model of occupational learning for tailors and midwives in their work on COPs. The master 'old-timer,' expert or more experienced workers would pass on their knowledge to the 'newcomer' apprentice under this paradigm. Learning through COPs has been used in a variety of workplace learning models across a variety of fields since the notion was first suggested (Billett, 2001; Eames & Bell, 2005)

Employing the COP concept to WIL, learners (WIL students) enter the workplace and are asked to take on authentic or legitimate but peripheral responsibilities by old-timers (e.g. workplace supervisors). WIL students must have access to a variety of activities as well as artefacts or instruments from which they can learn to fully participate in the community of practice. They also require access to other team members to learn from others' conversations and to learn how to communicate with others in the community. The application of Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of a COP to WIL allows students to do more than observing workplace behaviour; it allows them to be absorbed into the culture. From this standpoint, COP can allow hospitality students at WSU to gain a true understanding of how things work and what they must do to become full members of the COP. The study of Fleming, McLachlan and Pretti (2018) supports that by participating in WIL, hospitality students can encounter new knowledge and behaviours that make up the professional world by being placed alongside their workplace counterparts. The researcher employed COP as hospitality students who actively participate in the development of WIL as they gradually build their own professional identity and progress to fulfilling their degree programmes, in the process positioning themselves for future employment prospects.

Results and discussion

Thematic analysis was used in analysing the qualitative data collected from the participants.



Effectiveness of WIL in enhancing academic performance and practical work experience of hospitality students at WSU

There exists significant literature on the effectiveness of WIL in improving academic performance and work experience for students in the hospitality industry in South Africa (Biasni, Bohm & Rabadan-Gomez, 2016; Crawford & Wang, 2015; Milne & Caldicott, 2016). Advancing in theoretical and practical knowledge is a necessity for graduate employability in the hospitality industry (Clarke, 2017). The students interviewed in this study were asked about their perception regarding the effectiveness of WIL as an education-based programme and practical experience initiative. One of the participants said:

I am positive as a hospitality student that WIL has provided me with the chance to learn vital skills which the supervisor in our department delegates me to do. However, in some instances, I found the work boring as it is repeated now and again.

Another participant added:

As soon as I enrolled for WIL, I found myself improving my knowledge, as I knew what was happening in the field of practice. My academic performance greatly improved, thanks to this WIL programme.

The assertions by these students revealed that WIL has been regarded as a very crucial strategy in improving the academic performance of hospitality students at WSU. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the concerns raised by some students who found some tasks prescribed by the supervisor boring. These views corroborate the findings of a study by Henderson and Trede (2017) who ascertain that WIL enables students to earn practical experience and foster engagements and collaboration between universities and industry players. When natured, such a close relationship can help increase the employability chances of students after graduation as universities can serve as referral points by matching the skills the industry demands. Khuong (2016) supports the view that WIL links students to actual industry captains, which makes it easier to be absorbed into the labour market, particularly in the hotel and restaurant industry in South Africa. Based on this analysis, WIL remains important to hospitality students at WSU, as the turnaround time for finding employment can be shorted owing to the WIL acquired.

Perceptions of hospitality students regarding WIL as a skills development imperative

The implementation of WIL in many South African universities has been widely regarded as crucial for advancing the practical skills of hospitality students, which is also their advantage when applying for hospitality jobs. Studies by Ndlovu (2015) and Deen et al. (2016), both conducted in South Africa, attest to the notion that WIL is influential in equipping the students with work-based experience that enables their employability in the labour market. One of the students interviewed, however, had a different view regarding WIL as he said:



WIL exploits us; we are regarded as cheap labour and the coaching and mentoring by industry players are very limited.

While this student disputed the viability of WIL as an education and skills imperative, another student strongly supported WIL, as she confirmed that:

WIL has made realise that the theoretical knowledge we learn in class is not enough and getting the hands-on experience has opened my eyes to the whole management and functioning of the hospitality industry.

Whereas these two conflicting views were recorded by the researcher, the literature surveyed pointed out that WIL is crucial in enabling the employability of students, as many will be able to balance theory and practice. This view is supported by Garwe (2020) who argues that WIL enables the employability of student and lifelong success which goes beyond grade achievement. Suleman (2017) reiterates that WIL can define the future path of a student after graduation since industry captains prefer to employ those with practical based experience. From this assessment, it is notable that for WSU hospitality students to become prepared for their future employment, WIL is necessary as its benefits outweigh its demerits.

Potential barriers facing Hospitality students at WSU during WIL in hotels

There is abundant literature on tourism and hospitality in South Africa that shows that WIL presents many benefits to universities while it offers other problems that require addressing (Elijido-Ten, 2014; Usher, 2011). Ori (2014) argues that while it is undeniable that WIL offers the much-needed experience to students, problems such as limited funding by the Department of Education exist, and these culminate in a few students benefitting from the programme. However, Garwe (2020) claims that the most positive things for WIL are the increased chances of graduate employability and improvement in academic performance (Clarke, 2017). However, the adverse side of WIL includes the shortage of academically qualified supervisors to help students on WIL programmes and give them direction. Failure to secure the right employers is another obstacle in South Africa, given that the hospitality industry, which includes hotels and restaurants, is flooded, which in turn constrains the placement of students on the WIL programme. One of the participants interviewed explained that:

In my home area, there are no hotels but only small restaurants, which makes it difficult for me to enrol for WIL and earn the proper exposure and experience.

This assertion symbolises the plight some of the hospitality students at WSU face with regards to WIL. Because a significant number of students come from poor rural communities, access to hotels is a problem that may affect them post-graduation due to lack of placement. While WSU strives to ensure that students obtain a place for enrolling, the problem needs close collaboration between the universities and other distant industry players in hospitality.

Speaking on the issue of challenges faced by hospitality students, another participant added that:

WIL is vital for providing us with the opportunity to learn things practically in the physical environment as the theory-based knowledge we often have is limited. I appreciate the WIL programme although a shortage of hospitality places to be placed in is a challenge. For example, the experience we got from being employed in a hotel is different from that of a lodge.

It seems that apart from financial resources from employers to enrol many hospitality students, the shortage of hotels and lodges is another barrier to making WIL a success. This is confirmed in a study conducted by Govender and Taylor (2013) who expresses dissatisfaction over the scarcity of competent supervisors to ensure that students obtain the proper mentorship and guidance while on the WIL programme. Having the right attitudes of employers can go a long way in assisting students to understand the importance of WIL at the same acquiring the experience needed for future employment. As noted in the community of practice theory, in WIL, students are allocated responsibilities by workplace supervisors. This helps them learn about teamwork and improve how they interact in groups and workplaces.

4.4 Employability of hospitality students after WIL

As noted in other legal frameworks in South Africa such as the Skills Development Act of 1998, WIL targets the development of skills, which is crucial in preparing students for future employment. Since many employers demand work-related experience, WIL is done as part of ensuring that upon graduating, many students will not be excluded from the labour market due to lack of experience. The researcher was also interested in establishing whether participants viewed WIL as a strategy for them to be employable. There were various responses to these questions. One of the students said:

Yes, I do agree that WIL is designed to provide us with industry-related experience and its importance should not be underrated.

While commenting on the same issue another participant indicated that:

WIL is the gateway for us hospitality students to be employable when we graduate because hotels and lodges will be looking for people with job experience. So, WIL is indeed the answer.

These two responses from participants show the extent to which WIL is valued as a strategy for ensuring that hospitality students at WSU acquire practical experience, which not only broadens their theoretical knowledge but also prepares them for future employability. These sentiments are supported by Dwesini (2017) who states that hospitality students enrolling for



WIL stand a chance to get employed when they graduated. It is noted from these findings that WIL is playing a pivotal role among tourism and hospitality students at WSU, as it assists them with practical experience, which is useful in the hotels and restaurant industry. This is further supported by the community of practice theory, which states that learning occurs when there are interactions between stakeholders in social systems. Through their enrolment in hotels, students learn a lot in the hospitality community of practice, which is crucial for their future employment opportunities

Conclusions

This article draws from three broader objectives that sought to examine the effectiveness of WIL to enhance academic performance and practical work experience amongst hospitality students at Walter Sisulu University (WSU), perceptions of hospitality students regarding WIL as a skills development imperative and challenges faced by hospitality students on WIL programme. The community of practice theory was used to draw the theoretical understanding of hospitality students that enrolled for WIL as part of the requirement of their programme. The empirical findings of this study have shown that indeed WIL has been embraced by many students enrolled for the tourism and hospitality course at WSU as crucial in advancing the knowledge they have, and which they test against real-life practical experience. The analysis also indicated that the majority of students believe WIL provides them with the required skills to be able to look for employment after graduation. However, as shown in the findings, some students indicated that they believed WIL is not designed to adequately develop students, as they were exposed to what they referred to as 'industrial slavery', which they indicated was because they were not adequately remunerated for their services. Further complaints related to the lack of professional supervision when they were on WIL programmes, which made the programme boring and discouraging. Further examination of results also pointed to a shortage of hotels to place students, which trigger delays and negative attitudes towards WIL. To enhance the capacity of WIL as an education and practical learning platform, investment in the tourism and hospitality industry is required, including by improving hospitality infrastructure to enable students to be placed for training purposes.

Limitations and further research

This article relies on a small qualitative case study of Walter Sisulu University students enrolled for a tourism and hospitality course, which makes the findings difficult to generalise or apply to other contexts. Therefore, quantitative studies maybe conducted to assess whether WIL has transformed the minds of students to present them to the world as ready graduates who have both theoretical and practical knowledge of the specific jobs they intend to do in future.



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