Hospitality management students’ experiences of work-integrated learning (WIL): The case of Walter Sisulu University (WSU), South Africa.

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Abstract

This exploratory research assessed hospitality management students’ experiences of work-integrated learning (WIL) while placed in different hotels across South Africa. The context of the research was the hospitality management academic department (Buffalo City Campus) at Walter Sisulu University (WSU) in South Africa. While there is a considerable body of research on WIL in general there is however very limited research on how hospitality management students experience the WIL programme specifically.

Both the qualitative and quantitative approaches to research were utilized to collect data from students returning from industry. Questionnaires with open-ended and closed-ended questions were distributed to forty-five (45) hospitality management students. The results of this research clearly showed that students had both positive and negative experiences of WIL. It is hoped that the findings of this project will contribute in
improving the WIL programme in this department. This small-scale study will later on be introduced to other hospitality management departments at the other two campuses (Mthatha and Butterworth) of Walter Sisulu University.

Key terms: work-integrated learning, hospitality management, students’ experiences

**Introduction**

This exploratory research assessed students’ experiences of work-integrated learning (WIL) within the National Diploma in Hospitality Management at Walter Sisulu University (WSU), South Africa. WIL refers to the period students spend in the industry in order to integrate the theory learnt in the classroom with practice. This research project focused on hospitality management students (both second and third year students) who had just completed their WIL programmes. Our efforts to assess students’ experiences of WIL were intended to understand how participating hospitality students experienced learning in the workplace; the challenges they encountered within the work environment; and how they believe their training experiences should be improved. The findings of this study revealed that the participating students had both positive and negative experiences of the hospitality WIL programme. It is hoped that the results of this research project will enable the Hospitality Management Department to improve the quality of its WIL programme.
Background to the study

Walter Sisulu University (WSU) is a comprehensive university that resulted from the merger of two former technikons (Border Technikon and Eastern Cape Technikon) and a traditional university (University of Transkei). In line with its vision which focuses on innovative education, research and community partnerships, WSU offers some academic programs that are designed to incorporate periods of required work that integrate with classroom study. This institution has made a clear commitment to implementing and supporting WIL programmes that enhance the employability of its students as well as building links with employers.

The National Diploma in Hospitality Management is one of academic programmes with a compulsory component of WIL. Spowart (as cited in Keating, 2012) suggests that the vocational nature of hospitality management is ideal to utilise WIL as a method of transferring classroom activities to the workplace. McGlothlin Jr. (2003 as cited in Keating, 2012), agrees that the importance of WIL being part of a curriculum in a field such as hospitality management cannot be overemphasized. Students at WSU who are registered for the national diploma in hospitality management have to undergo two(2) six- month periods of training during which they are placed in hotels throughout South Africa. The first six months are spent in industry during the second semester of the second year of study. The second six-month period takes place during the second semester of the third year or final year of study. The first training is called Module B, and trainees have to work in the kitchen, restaurant and housekeeping of the hotel.
During the second training, which is termed Module C, students spend their time at the front office and at the housekeeping department of the hotel.

Before students leave the university to undergo training they go through a compulsory work-preparedness programme (WPP), also called “orientation” which prepares them for the industry they are about to join.

**Work-integrated learning (WIL)**

The terms work-integrated learning (WIL) and experiential learning (EL) are sometimes used interchangeably in South Africa. At Walter Sisulu University the two concepts mean the same thing. WIL or EL refers to a strategy of applied learning (learning integrated with work) which involves a structured educational programme that combines productive relevant work experience with academic study and “professional reflection” (CHE, 2010). Students are required to undergo a period of on-the-job training as part of their national diplomas. In this way, students are given the opportunity to effectively integrate the theory gained in the classroom effectively with the practice and the responsibility of the workplace.

The Work-Integrated Learning Research Unit, based at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) in South Africa uses the concept “work-integrated learning” to describe an approach to career-focused education that has much in common with work-based learning (WBL). What distinguishes WIL from WBL is the WIL’s emphasis on integrative aspects of such learning. WIL could thus be described as an educational...
approach that aligns academic and workplace practices for the mutual benefit of students and workplaces (CHE, 2010).

WIL is an invaluable experience as it offers students an essential bridge between the theory gained in a university classroom and the realities that occur in the social and physical context of the workplace. The rationale for WIL at WSU is to enhance the students’ learning experiences and to ensure “work-ready” graduates. In essence, WIL is a partnership between the university, the students and the employers. The students are central in this partnership. Consequently, it is important to understand how they experience this kind of learning.

From the perspective of students, WIL is about job readiness and is a gateway to lifelong learning (Anonymous, 2011). Students are expected to learn not only the technical skills of the chosen profession but also workplace cultural and other transferable skills of the workplace, such as communication, organization, teamwork, etc. that are directly relevant in terms of their employability as well as their ability to have a successful and fulfilling career (Anonymous).

**Literature review**

While there is considerable body of work on work-integrated learning (WIL) in general, there is however very limited research on how hospitality management students experience the WIL programmes specifically. This exploratory research tries to fill this gap. Riley and Ladkin (1984) and Ladkin and Riley (1996), (as cited in Westhuizen and Kesa, 2010) assert that some of the existing research has focused on issues relating to
career paths and career development. Furthermore Westhuizen and Kesa (2010) contend that a key issue in this research has been an attempt to determine the various factors which influence length and development. Casado (1992 as cited in Westhuizen and Kesa) focused on the expectations of students on entering employment. He found students in general were quite realistic about the realities of the organization.

Westhuizen and Kesa further assert that findings in their study point to the need to place greater emphasis on the types of expectations students have prior to their placement and more specifically on the impact this would have on future expectations of the industry. Limited literature, which focuses on students’ perspectives in the hospitality management field, could be found justifying the current research project. Moreover, the findings of this project will enable the hospitality students to reflect on their experiences of the workplace. Weisz and Smith (2005) argue that reflection on experiences should be central to any WIL programme as this facilitates deep learning for students and equips them for the future.

**Research methodology**

*Research purpose*

The current research assessed hospitality management students’ experiences of WIL while placed in different hotels across South Africa. It is hoped that the results of this research will assist in improving the WIL programme in the hospitality department. A questionnaire with open and closed-ended questions was used to collect data from students returning from experiential learning (industry).

The research being reported here sought to gain data about the following issues:
Whether roles and responsibilities were clearly explained to trainees in the workplace

Whether trainees were integrated as part of the work team

Trainees’ experiences of supervision

Whether trainees experienced any personal development during the training period

Whether there was alignment between what they had learnt at the university and what was required of them in the workplace

Challenges trainees encountered whilst on training

What students believed should be done differently to improve their experiences of WIL.

Population

The target population for this study consisted of a total of eighty second and third-year hospitality management students who had just returned from the industry at the beginning of the academic year, 2012. This figure included 30 students who had done Module B and 50 students who had completed Module C from the beginning of July 2011 to the end of December 2011.

Sampling

Convenience sampling was used to choose participants. According to this sampling method participants are chosen on the basis of being available. Tustin, Ligthelm, Martins & Van Wyk (2010:346) convenience sampling is useful in the exploratory phase of a research project. Questionnaires were distributed to 30 students who completed their first training (Module B) and to 15 who had completed their second training (Module C). The
questionnaire was first piloted to four students and thereafter distributed to the rest of the sample members.

Data collection

The main data collection instrument was a questionnaire with open and closed-ended questions. The questionnaire comprised questions, which required responses on a 5-point Likert-type scale where respondents were asked to rate their levels of agreement ("strongly agree" to "strongly disagree") to various issues being investigated. Participants were asked to add narrative comments about their experiences to provide deep and rich meaning. Recommendations were also sought for future WIL program development.

The students for Module B completed the questionnaires themselves and Module C students were interviewed telephonically by the researchers since they had completed their studies and were not around the university at the time the research was undertaken. Of the population of 50 Module C students and 30 Module B students a total of 45 students (15 Module C and 30 Module B) responded to the questionnaire.

Research findings

The results from the questionnaires were analysed using Excel and responses were summarised using percentiles. The questions were grouped into seven categories and findings are reported below using the headings in italics.

My role and responsibilities in the workplace have been clearly articulated and explained to me.
Regarding roles and responsibilities, 66.67% of all Module B students strongly agreed that roles and responsibilities were clearly articulated and explained to them in the workplace, while 4.17% agreed with the statement and 20.83% disagreed with the statement.

Among Module C students 80% strongly agreed that their roles and responsibilities were clearly articulated and explained to them in the workplace, and 33% agreed with the statement. Only 6.67% strongly disagreed with the statement. In their comments, the majority of students indicated they received induction on the first week of their training. Among comments received was the following:

    Respondent: Everything was explained to us at the beginning of the training and we were given the roster. The only problem is that the roster was not followed. We were sometimes asked to do other people’s jobs. Working hours were not normal. I did not have much to say because I wanted to finish the training and graduate.

Another student explained that at the end of the first week they slept at the hotel for one night. The employer wanted them to experience what the guests are experiencing. Another respondent who disagreed with the statement said:

    We were treated like slaves and they were always complaining about the stipend they were paying us.

*My workplace supervisors were approachable and available.*

When asked how they experienced supervision 45.83% in Module B strongly agreed that their workplace supervisors were approachable and available while 37.5% agreed to the statement. Of the respondents, 3% were undecided and 4.17% strongly disagreed with the statement.
Respondent who disagreed with this statement: My supervisor had favourites among us. She liked to criticise and make you feel unwelcome. She did not act professionally at all.

In the case of Module C 73.33% strongly agreed and 26.67% agreed that their supervisors were approachable and available. None of Module C students disagreed with this statement.

Respondent: My manager was available all the time. He asked me to call him even if he is off duty if I’m experiencing a problem. All of them were very encouraging. Even if your supervisor is not around someone else would assist you. Everyone was involved in our training including the general manager. I think this is because I did my training in a small hotel.

Do you feel you have developed the following attributes during your WIL/cooperative education(coop) placement?

When respondents were asked whether they had developed the given attributes during WIL placement they gave the responses as reflected in Table 1:

Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Module B</th>
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<th>Module C</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal communication</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-confidence</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>93.33%</td>
<td>6.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent judgment</td>
<td>95.83%</td>
<td>4.17%</td>
<td>93.33%</td>
<td>6.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application of theoretical knowledge</td>
<td>91.67%</td>
<td>8.33%</td>
<td>86.67%</td>
<td>13.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionalism</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>93.33%</td>
<td>6.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to continue in this field</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>86.67%</td>
<td>13.33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Comments from Module B respondents are indicated below:

Respondent: Now I am more confident that I want to be in the hospitality field more than ever before. I have developed how to communicate with the customers. Before the training I was shy but now I’ve developed self-confidence and know how to be professional when dealing with customers.

This respondent believes he has developed all the attributes listed in this question.

Respondent: I don’t even want to continue with this field because most of the time people think you are a slave. They take advantage of you.

Comments from Module C respondents:

Respondent: I’m now working in the hospitality industry. Getting a job within a short space of time explains that I acquired the skills required to work in this industry.

Another respondent: At the moment I have a part-time job in this industry. Even if I don’t get a job I can start my own catering business.

*Do you see an alignment/connection between what you have learnt at university and what is required of you in the workplace?*

All respondents (100%) from both categories responded in the affirmative when asked if they saw an alignment between what was taught in class and what was required of them in the workplace. One respondent commented as follows:

With regards to the front office everything I learnt in the classroom was real in the workplace. The guest would come in and swear at you and you need to be calm because the customer is regarded as being always right.

*Did you supervisor conduct the monthly performance appraisal as required?*

On the question of performance appraisal, all respondents reported that employers did not sit down with them at the end of every month and discuss their performance with them as required. They said all feedback was given orally and informally. It has never been in writing. Supervisors only signed the logbooks at the end of the training period.
Respondents said this disadvantaged them because they needed to get feedback on their performance whilst still on training so they could have time to improve. They said supervisors did encourage them but in very informal ways. One trainee said it would be appreciated if they could get something like sleeping one night at the hotel or even getting a voucher or a certificate of excellence in recognition of their good work.

*Did you find the work-preparedness programme (WPP)/orientation you received prior to your training useful?*

The majority of respondents indicated that the work-preparedness program they received prior to leaving the university for WIL helped them a great deal.

**Comments:**

- By the time I arrived at the workplace I was alert. I knew what to expect. I knew my rights and therefore would know if I was abused.
- Part of the WPP we received dealt with student abuse and sexual harassment while on training.

When asked whether respondents experienced difficulties during training the following responses were received:

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module B</th>
<th>Module C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Responses show both groups (Module B & Module C) experienced difficulties whilst undergoing training. However more respondents from Module B experienced difficulties than did respondents from Module B.

Respondent: My only difficulty was my supervisor’s bad attitude. She did not treat me well. There was lack of communication between management and staff. As trainees we had to find our way around the workplace.

Respondents from Module C: Managers did not have time to look at our work. They heard only from staff members about our performance. I wish they could also be close to us so they know exactly where our shortfalls are.

Another comment: It becomes very stressful to have to look for a place to stay in a place that you don’t know. Sometimes you feel compelled to take the placement even if you don’t know where you will stay because you want to graduate.

In what ways could your WIL experience be improved?

Respondent: The university should keep on checking on students at least once a month. I also appeal to the Department of Hospitality Management at WSU to please remove housekeeping from Module C because it takes a lot of our time which would be utilized for the front office. Most of hospitality graduates look for work in the front office when they finish their studies. So we would like to get more experience in this area.

Another respondent: The university should monitor training by visiting the workplace frequently. There needs to be more interaction between the university and the hotel. Also the sequence of the rotation is very important. We should start at housekeeping then front office and finally night audit.

Respondents raised the issue of accommodation as the greatest challenge they experienced. They also stated that they felt abandoned by the university when no one from the university contacted them during the first few days or weeks of their training to check how they were settling in.

A suggestion arising from this challenge was that the university could charge students more for WIL registration to cover accommodation expenses for may be the first week of
their training and pay that money over to the hotel. They say it is very difficult to get accommodation in a place you do not know during the first few days of arrival at the hotel.

**Conclusions and recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to shed light on how hospitality students experienced work-integrated learning (WIL) while placed at different hotels across South Africa. The results of this research clearly show that students had both positive and negative experiences of the WIL programme.

**Positives**

All students felt WIL improved their skills generally. Some evidence was also found that students were able to apply the knowledge and skills they acquired in the classroom in their job practices in the workplace. This shows WSU has achieved its objective of linking theory with practice in the case of these students. Students found the preparation they had received from the university prior to the training valuable. They were also grateful to the institution and employers for providing them with opportunities for personal development.

**Negatives**

However the results revealed some areas of concern that need to be addressed. About 20.83% of students stated that they did not receive induction on arrival at the workplace. Students cannot be expected to do well when they are not welcomed and given instructions on what they are expected to do in the workplace.
The study also revealed the students do not receive enough support from both the university and the industry. In their comments they call for the university to intervene regarding the accommodation problem.

Evidence shows that trainees had different experiences which could partly be attributed to the fact that they did training in different hotels. For instance some supervisors were supportive and others were not. Finally, now, that the views of students have been elicited the next step is for the Hospitality Department at WSU to attempt to address the gaps identified in this study.

**Recommendations**

1. The university should have more interaction with the hotels during the students’ training period. As one student advised academics do not need to be there physically. They can frequently communicate with the students and supervisors by telephone or e-mail so that if there is a problem it can be resolved before it escalates.

2. It is recommended that the university must emphasize the importance of induction to the employers. Students need to know exactly what is expected of them if they are to achieve the desired outcome.

3. The importance of performance appraisal must also be emphasized to the employers. It is crucial that students get feedback whilst still doing training so that they can improve their performance.
References


