

The Hospitality Students' Experiences with Work-integrated Learning in TVET Colleges

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Work-integrated learning has been adopted in higher education worldwide as a strategy to transfer classroom activities to the workplace. There is a dearth of research in the South African context that seeks to explore the hospitality students' experiences with work-integrated learning (WIL) in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges. Thus, this study sought to explore the students' experiences with work-integrated learning in South African TVET colleges. The theories underpinning the study were the Experiential Learning Theory and Workplace Participatory Practices Theory. The study adopted a qualitative design comprising of 30 purposively selected students in 5 TVET colleges. A focus group discussion was used to gather data that was used to answer the research questions. Data was analysed using a thematic framework, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. The following themes resulted from the analysis: skills necessary for a hospitality graduate; students' expectations and perceptions of WIL; students' readiness for employment; support for students; resources, equipment, and infrastructure for WIL; work placements and the curriculum.

Key words: *Work-integrated learning; hospitality; TVET; student support.*

Background

According to Jackson (2013:99), WIL in higher education broadly refers to on-campus and workplace learning activities and experiences that integrate theory with practice in academic learning programmes. This includes work placements, internships and practicum; project-based learning; and service-learning. WIL curricula can include such familiar notions as



placements, internships, practicals, supervised practice, and even simulations (Smith 2012:247). Spowart (as cited in Keating 2012) suggests that the vocational nature of hospitality management is ideal to utilise WIL as a method of bringing classroom activities into the workplace. In this conception of WIL, it is not just about preparing students for their future careers (although this is undoubtedly one of the intended outcomes), but about students engaging in a range of different types of educationally purposeful experiences which are both experiential and self-directed (McLennan & Keating 2008:4). A field of study such as hospitality involves both theoretical and excessive practical knowledge. For the practice to take place, the theory must exist.

Mak and Melody (2014:263) also mention that the curriculum design should meet the needs of the industry. Therefore, the operations and issues of the industry should be included in the curriculum so that students can have a better understanding of hospitality. The skills and qualities required by the industry should also be incorporated into the curriculum so that students are trained as future leaders and professionals, with both technical and theoretical knowledge. As a result, there is a need to ensure that the graduates not only meet educational expectations but also industry expectations regarding the skill sets needed in the workplace (Raybould & Wilkins 2006:177).

In 2014, Nicolaidis conducted a qualitative study on WIL for the culturally diverse hospitality industry in South Africa, following an example in Germany. His study found that students working towards obtaining qualifications in disciplines such as hotel management or food and beverage management are required to complete a period of WIL or internship as part of their academic programmes. The primary aim of the WIL period is to allow students to learn relevant skills, competencies, policies, systems, and procedures in every department they can get work in, such as those in a hotel. This usually takes place in the last semester before graduation (Nicolaidis 2014).

Currently, there is no requirement for a National Certificate Vocational (NCV) qualification to expose learners to practical experience in the workplace or work-related environment. The majority of college graduates complete their studies without having had any work experience. This means that the TVET sector is producing a large number of unskilled and unemployable graduates. The ideal situation is for students to have a compulsory semester of WIL (Fleming & Eames 2005: 28) and then transfer these technical skills to the real work environment. Spowart (2006a: 11) mentions that South African hotel schools offer national diplomas in hospitality management and food and beverage management, both of which include compulsory WIL. The hotel schools introduced WIL into their programmes in the early 1970s, and have since set a high standard. Besides the formal release to the workplace in the third year, the students are also exposed to the real work environment on campus.

On the contrary, the TVET sector has limited resources and infrastructure, resulting in college students still being disadvantaged when compared to those from the universities of technology. If the TVET sector fails to expose the students to a work-related environment, it means that the students in TVET Colleges will continue being severely disadvantaged if compared to other higher educational institutions. Young South Africans, particularly TVET learners, are struggling to find employment after completing their studies, because most of these learners complete their studies without being exposed to the real-work environment. Spowart (2006b) further elaborates that if the students are placed correctly, they will be better prepared to enter the world of work. Malale & Sentsho (2014: 683) advocate that the core function of the TVET Colleges is education and training for the world of work. It is therefore the responsibility of the colleges to ensure that the students experience the workplace before the completion of their studies.

Theoretical orientation

This study is underpinned by two theories; namely the Experiential Learning Theory and Workplace Participatory Practices Theory. The Experiential Learning Theory and Workplace Participatory Practices Theory both conceptualise the effectiveness of WIL applied by colleges and through work placements. While each of these theories has contributed to advancing a conceptual framework for work-integrated learning, no one single theory or model can be used to explain WIL (Calway 2006).

The Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) places the learner in the centre of learning by creating an environment that will create an atmosphere for the learner to develop new skills and knowledge. That is why ELT is the most applied theory in higher education; whereby the students are given a variety of activities to probe their thinking and problem-solving skills. ELT is applied during practical-based lessons through simulations and whereby a lecturer demonstrates a particular task to students and afterward students must complete it on their own or do role plays where students may be given a scenario that resembles the real work environment in which the desired behaviour may be exhibited.

According to Billett (2004: 312), the Workplace Participatory Practice Theory regards the learning that happens in workplaces as equally valuable and equally transferable to the learning that takes place in formal educational institutions. A workplace participatory practice takes place when students are placed in a work environment, either in a hotel or a food and beverage-related area. The college placement officer does the placements during holidays. Sadly, not all hospitality students can be placed because of the influx of students registered in the TVET sector. The handfuls that are placed get to work in various departments in a hotel to gain experience, skills and knowledge. Billett (2004) emphasises that besides placing the student in the workplace being essential, the college also needs to look at the actual training received by the student to assess if it meets the college's requirements.



Research methodology

This study was designed to determine the experiences of hospitality students with WIL in the TVET colleges. The study adopted a qualitative research design, in line with Maree's (2007) notion that this approach may be viewed as an inquiry process involving the understanding of a complex, holistic picture, analysis, words, and reports of detailed views of informants and conducted in a natural setting. The selection of the participants in this study was done using purposive sampling. According to De Vos, Strydom, Fouche, and Delport (2013), purposive sampling illustrates a feature or process that is of interest for a particular study- though this does not simply imply any case we happen to choose. Silverman, (2000:104) contends that in purposive sampling the researcher must first think critically about the parameters of the population and then choose the sample accordingly. Following the qualitative research design, 30 hospitality students were purposively selected based on the following criteria: They had to be registered in the current academic year as Hospitality NQF Level Four students and show a level of commitment to their studies through continual classroom attendance and satisfying academic results. Three separate focus group discussions were conducted with thirty selected hospitality students to determine their experiences with WIL in the TVET colleges. This was done to listen to participants explain in their own words their experiences with WIL in the TVET colleges (Creswell 2013). According to De Vos, Strydon, Fouche, and Delport (2011), a focus group discussion refers to a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment. Confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy were assured. To answer the research questions, as suggested by Dawson (2002), the researchers had an interview schedule listing the specific questions to be discussed. According to Howitt and Cramer (2011), an interview schedule provides a guideline for what is to be covered in the interview to guard against straying from the significant issues. The discussions were intended to elicit information from hospitality students about their experiences with WIL in the TVET colleges. The interview schedule, therefore, covered the following key areas:

1. What are the essential skills for a hospitality graduate to thrive in the world of work?
2. What are your expectations and perceptions of WIL in TVET colleges?
3. What is the nature of the support that the students receive before and during WIL placement?
4. What kind of resources, equipment, and infrastructure is necessary for a successful WIL?
5. Describe the work placement procedures and processes.
6. Explain the fitness for purpose of the Hospitality curriculum within the NCV.

Qualitative data collected was analysed through thematic analysis by identifying emerging themes from the data collected (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011). The approval to carry out this study was granted by the South African University's Ethical Committee. We adhered to



the following ethical considerations: before data collection, we ensured that we obtained the participants' informed consent. During and after data collection we protected the participants from harm and maintained their confidentiality and anonymity.

Findings

After analysing the data from the focus group interviews with the 30 hospitality students, seven themes emerged about their perspectives of WIL's contribution to the employability of hospitality students.

Skills necessary for a hospitality graduate

There are numerous skills which are mandatory for being effective in the hospitality industry. These skills are taught during theoretical and practical lessons. The students expressed the importance of people skills as one of the most important character traits for hospitality students. To be successful in this industry, students needed to have the ability to listen, communicate and relate to others on a professional level.

“They need to show professionalism at all times, whether in the classroom or workplace” PL04.

“They need to be well-disciplined and committed to excellence” PL02.

“Being a team player” ST09.

“To be honest, as you'll have access to cash and guests' belongings” ST24.

“To love your job, because you'll work long hours all the time” ST17.

“Not to be short-tempered, especially when dealing with customers” ST08.

The participants indicated several technical skills that they had received from the college, ranging from baking to cooking. Technical skills are essential in the hospitality industry because they teach students how to perform specific tasks. This research unveiled that college students were taught cooking and serving skills.

“Cooking for one is something that I will say I have learned. I came here without knowing how to cook, but I can cook decent meals now” ST04.

“I know how to garnish food, which is the skill I didn't know before” ST11.



“I can now look for a job as a waiter or a chef because of the skills I got from this college” ST17.

“I enjoyed learning how to make cocktails; I can mix my own drinks now” ST21.

Students further mentioned learning a computer skill, and that is fundamental for all job types, as most companies are dependent on computers. Technology is important as it can help any business to stay ahead and competitive. If students possessed computer skills they would be at a greater advantage for being hired in the hospitality industry.

“Before I came here I had no idea how to use a computer but today I can type, do spreadsheets, PowerPoint and use the internet” ST13.

“I learnt how to use a computer, which is a skill I learnt from the college as I’ve never used a computer before in my life. I greatly cherish that” ST25.

The research revealed that students gained more soft skills than technical skills from the college. The literature review emphasised the importance of soft skills; that potential employers value soft skills more than technical skills because it gives the student a better chance to adapt easily in a work environment and because they ensure a productive and healthy work environment when they possess these skills. Problem-solving, communication, team work, and interpersonal skills were commonly mentioned among the participants. The literature review stated that these skills are highly valued in the workplace. The following excerpts helped to authenticate the above claims:

“We learn more soft skills than technical skills at the college” ST09.

“I have learnt how to work in a team, which will help me adapt well in the workplace. Sometimes our lecturers put us in groups when we doing our practical or class activities and that’s where we learn to cooperate with others” ST03.

“I have learnt that it is important to listen to other team players and be able to work with people and talk to them in a manner that is appropriate, without offending anyone” ST14.

“I have learnt interpersonal and problem-solving skills” ST13.

“I learnt to be hard-working, dedicated, got to motivate myself to push for excellence. Got to be a people person” ST20.

“Time management skills are also essential; we learn them when we are given tasks to complete because there are deadlines we must meet as students” ST26.

Students' expectations and perceptions of WIL

The literature reveals that there are gaps between the expectations and perceptions of students regarding WIL, but very few provide an account of the views of students about the internship.

The students mentioned that during their first year of study, which was NQF level Two, they were disappointed because they expected to do several practical lessons. They expected that they would be doing more practical lessons and that they would do little theory. They wished to spend more time in the kitchen cooking different dishes each day than spending more time in the classroom.

"I feel in the college we do more theory than practical" ST15.

"I think we do five or six practical lessons in a year, both for hospitality services and food preparation. Most of the time we do theory" ST03.

"We cover all the topics that are in the textbooks during theory lessons, but when it comes to practicals we learn by using our imagination because sometimes we do two practical in a term" ST04.

"Or even two practical in a year" ST24.

"I feel the theory is 95 per cent and practical 5 per cent" ST12.

"I thought I would be in the kitchen from Monday to Friday. We didn't think we will be spending so much time sitting in a desk" ST21.

They even expressed the importance of getting an education and that coming to college was better than sitting at home.

"You gain knowledge and skills relevant to the hospitality industry. Companies want students with qualifications; coming to the college will get you that qualification" ST15.

They affirmed that getting a qualification boosted their chances of getting a job.

"I would recommend the college because coming here is better than sitting at home. You get knowledge and skills that will help in being employable" ST02.

One student further mentioned that the NCV qualification was helpful to them since they did not get good enough marks at school to qualify to attend university. They further stated that the TVET qualification gave them a second chance in life.



“Since I did not get good points in matric, I am happy that I got a chance to study something that I love. TVET Colleges are for students that want second chances in life” ST07.

The students commended learning the fundamental components that encompassed Mathematical Literacy, English First Additional Language, and Life Orientation (LO) (life skills and computer skills). Below are the different views of the students on these fundamental subjects:

“In the beginning I was disappointed that I had to learn Maths, English and LO, because I thought we will be cooking one way. But later on, I realised the importance of learning these subjects, especially English, as my communication skills have improved” ST14.

“Once the months progress you realise the importance of learning fundamental subjects” ST17.

“I have improved on my English speaking and writing skills. I have gained confidence in speaking in front of other people because I know I won’t make too many mistakes” ST03.

“I think the best part about LO is the computer skills that I have acquired. I didn’t even know how to switch it on before” ST18.

Students’ readiness for employment

The literature review revealed that the travel and tourism industry as a whole remains one of the world’s most important drivers of economic growth, accounting for nearly nine per cent of global GDP. It is also the world’s largest employer. More than 225 million around the globe currently work in this sector and by 2022 travel and tourism will employ 328 million, creating 73 million new jobs. With this said, it is no wonder that hospitality is one of the most popular programmes in the TVET sector. It mentioned further that TVET Colleges form a sector designed to equip the youth with skills, knowledge and habit cultures that will enable them to secure and hold jobs successfully (Amadi 2013: 137).

There were mixed views expressed by participants with regard to students being ready for employment.

“When we finish our studies we know we have acquired enough skills to go look for a job in the industry” ST24.

“I think I have acquired enough skills to open my own catering company” ST05.



“As much as we don’t do practical as we wish, the little that we get can help me secure a job” ST17.

Placement officers also mentioned that students’ behaviour was also critical when placed in the workplace:

“Host employers sometime complain that students don’t come to work on their payday” PL01.

“Some don’t show professionalism and respect to their supervisors, and so on” PL05.

Support for students

The research revealed that the students valued their lecturers’ support. Even though students raised more disappointments than satisfactory comments regarding their experiences in the college environment, they were thrilled with the support that they received from their lecturers.

“When I first came here, I regretted my decision. I thought I should have gone elsewhere to study. But now I am glad I stayed because we get a lot of support from our lecturers” ST08.

“The lecturers offer us support and encourage us to excel” ST15.

“If you get support, it is easy to get direction and know where you going” ST20.

“This is the reason why I will recommend the college to others; because of the support I have received from the lectures thus far” ST23.

The students mentioned that the lecturers also assisted in finding work placements for them.

“I am so grateful to my lecturer because if it wasn’t for her, we wouldn’t be working over weekends. She goes out of her way to make sure we get industry experience” ST12.

“They even go as far as assist us in doing our CVs and reference letters to find work placements” ST17.

“We thank our lecturers for looking for placements. If it wasn’t for them we would know nothing” ST27.

Resources, equipment, and infrastructure for WIL

The participants mentioned resources, equipment, and infrastructure as one of the biggest challenges that they faced. They mentioned that this limited the effectiveness of WIL in TVET Colleges. The participants mentioned the following regarding resources:

“I wish for the textbooks to arrive on time. Sometimes we receive textbooks at the end of the second term. I don’t think that is right. Even if lecturers make us copies, we lose them and the quality is not the same as textbook” ST04.

The participants also mentioned that there was only one set of uniforms (one for the kitchen and the other for service) given to them in their first year of study. Since the NCV is a three-year-long qualification, the students suggested that they should be given a new set of uniforms every year.

“Hospitality department is ignored; you can’t wear one uniform for three years. We sometimes gain and lose weight” ST05.

“I also think we should be given a new set of uniform every year” ST08.

“No one wants to wear a tight fighting uniform; it’s uncomfortable and unsafe, especially in the kitchen” ST14.

The research revealed that WIL existed in the TVET Colleges. The curriculum and policy documents substantiated this. The infrastructure was there, but it seemed that the lecturers had an issue with the equipment. Another issue was that there seemed to be budget restrictions when it came to practice.

“If the college could also provide us with resources so that we can learn more practical. Every time we are told budget, budget... How are we supposed to learn without practising?” ST11.

“There are dishes that we can’t cook. We are told there are no ingredients, but what is sad is that these dishes are in our textbooks” ST18.

“I wish I could learn how to cook different sea food dishes, ones that are in the textbook. We see the pictures in the textbook but we can’t cook them” ST21.

The participants also voiced their frustrations regarding the condition and availability of equipment.



“We don’t have enough knives. The lecturer would say, ‘use the correct knife’, but we don’t have it and we end up using any” ST26.

“We don’t have enough equipment, for example, we use one cake mould for 20 students” ST01.

“Our cold room is not working. There was a time when all the meat for the practical went off, and we couldn’t do practicals. If they could fix the equipment I’d be happy” ST05.

“There is a number of faulty equipment in the kitchen; sometimes we burn dishes because the stoves are too high” ST11.

“Sometimes you don’t know if you know how to do something properly or not, because the end product is either burnt or there was a shortage of ingredients” ST09.

Work placements

The research revealed that the majority of college students had not been placed for WBE, despite the fact that the qualification required compulsory work placements. Some participants commented that they had never been placed in the workplace.

“No work placement has taken place for NCV hospitality students ever since I have been in this college” ST14.

“The placement officer doesn’t assist us to get placed; we don’t receive support at all from him” ST18.

“Last year I was able to secure a placement for a handful of NCV students, but I must say that since work placement isn’t a compulsory requirement for NCV qualification, NATED students take first priority as they can’t complete their diploma qualification without in-service training. So I place hospitality NATED students first” PL02.

“Placement depends merely on SETAs. If there is no funding for that particular programme, we won’t be able to place them... SETAs base their funding on critical skills. Last year I only managed to place 2 NCV hospitality through CATHSSETA” PL02.

“Another challenge is that students also don’t want to work without a stipend” PL03.

The participants mentioned further that what they learned at the workplace was something that they had not learnt in the college.



“At the workplace, we can learn what we didn’t learn at the college, and that would be really beneficial. Even if we are placed during weekends” ST04.

“At the workplace you’ll gain more understanding on what was taught in the college” ST20.

“We’ll get more understanding because what we learn in the workplace will make everything easier to understand” ST22.

The study revealed that the students that were fortunate enough to be placed by the college were not necessarily based in the hotel industry, but they were based in places that dealt with customer service. One college placed the students through an events company and they were placed as access controllers at the soccer stadium.

“I’ve been placed, but I was an access controller where national tournaments took place. It is not the same as hotel or restaurant because I felt it was not relevant to my qualification. I felt like I was a security guard” ST04.

“Even though I was an access controller I did learn more about customer service, which is an essential skill for hospitality industry” ST03.

“I learnt more about professionalism like getting to work on time, dealing with customers from various backgrounds” ST02.

Some participants also stated that they had looked for placement on their own, since the college had not played its role in this regard.

“Even if I’ve never been placed by the college, I looked for an establishment and got it. And I learnt a lot of stuff. But I wish it was the college that placed me, so that it will be more formalised and organised” ST23.

“If I didn’t look for the part-time job, it would have been difficult for me to learn certain things. I learn easier when I do things in real life” ST28.

The curriculum

The NCV curriculum focuses mainly on reconstructing society; providing a curriculum that will empower citizens with skills, knowledge and the correct attitude. It enables teachers to provide students with appropriate and purposeful learning experiences and opportunities. All subjects, fundamental and vocational, provide the learner with the opportunity for practical application- to take the concepts learnt and apply them in real life situations. It is critical that

learners receive the necessary experiential learning that will develop their practical competencies.

However, the participants brought to light that the NCV syllabus was one of the significant issues failing them. They criticised the curriculum for being too broad, too long and not serving them satisfactorily. Students felt that the way that the curriculum was structured did not give them options when it came to choosing their career of choice or excelling in their area of interest.

“If we could choose the area of specialisation we are interested in, it would be beneficial to us students because some of us don’t want to become chefs” ST27.

“I know I want to become a pastry chef. I wish I had choice to only learn pastry” ST08.

“We want to be able to come with our own signature dishes and drinks” ST24.

However that was not the case, as the research revealed that the NCV hospitality curriculum was broad and that too much theory was covered. Students expressed their frustration with the number of practical lessons taught being insufficient, because they sometimes only did one practical lesson per term.

“What we learn in the college is not enough for us to compete in the outside world; we are taught too much theory” ST11.

“When we compare ourselves with other students from other higher education institutions, we do a lot of theory. I feel there should be more practical than theoretical lessons” ST18.

“I thought we were going to be in the kitchen from Monday to Friday, I didn’t think we will be spending so much time sitting in a desk” ST20.

“We thought even if there was the theory, practical was going to be more” ST28.

“I could say being taught more theory was a huge disappointment” ST29.

Discussion

The findings revealed that the students received a number of soft and technical skills from the college. This view is supported by Amadi (2013: 137) in that TVET is a sector designed to equip the youth with skills, knowledge and habit cultures that will enable them to secure and hold jobs successfully. The hospitality curriculum must consist of strong practical and ‘soft’ people management skills (Shariff 2013: 244). These skills are acquired through both practical

and theoretical lessons. Nassetta, Palleschi & Reese (2013: 3) state that it is useful to note at the outset that hospitality programmes differ significantly from other vocational and occupational programmes. Hence, the findings revealed the attributes a hospitality graduate should possess in order to secure a job. These are: people skills; interpersonal skills; being a team player; going the extra mile; excelling in customer service; listening skills; problem-solving skills; communication skills and time management skills. As a result, there is a need to ensure that the graduates meet not only their educational expectations, but also the industry expectations regarding the skill sets needed in the workplace (Raybould & Wilkins 2006:177).

The findings also revealed that practical teaching was the main form of WIL in TVET colleges. Spowart (as cited in Keating 2012) suggests that the vocational nature of hospitality management is ideal to utilise WIL as a method of bringing classroom activities into the workplace. It was further revealed that during their first year of study the students were disappointed because they had expected to have more practical lessons than theory lessons. Taylor and Geldenhuys (2016: 3) state that a review of the literature identifies that there are gaps between the expectations and perceptions of the students regarding WIL, but very few studies provide an account of the views of the students about their internships. The TVET students wished for the practical component of the hospitality programme to be standardised in all 50 colleges, so that they could all receive the same quality of education. The findings revealed that there was currently no requirement for an NCV qualification to expose learners to practical experience in the workplace or a work-related environment. This means that the TVET sector is producing a large number of unskilled and unemployable graduates. The hospitality qualification requires that the student be exposed to a work environment for at least six months. According to the Department of Education (DoE) (2004:190) (Report No. 151), the National Diploma in Hospitality Management must include a minimum of half a year of experiential time.

The findings further revealed that participants voiced dissatisfaction regarding the lack of resources, equipment and infrastructure. The equipment was found to be either in short supply or broken, while the infrastructure was not up to scratch. The colleges need to resolve these issues as a matter of urgency, so that TVET colleges are on par with other institutions of higher education.

It was also found that the NCV curriculum was too dense, too broad in terms of content and too heavy for a vocational programme. Lo (2012:76) states that a specific curriculum innovation may lead society in changing in a particular direction, but usually a curriculum change reflects a societal change. The participants stated that they wanted the NCV curriculum to be changed, to include more practical lessons since it is a vocational qualification. In this way the participants will gain more experience and even if they don't go for work-based learning, they will still receive substantial practical knowledge in the college. The study lastly found that there was no workbook on practical lessons, and this resulted in the students



receiving incomparable experiences in various colleges because each lecturer did things the way he/she deemed fit. The participants felt that there was an inadequacy amongst the colleges in terms of deliverance of the curriculum. Therefore, the participants recommended the standardisation of practical lessons by having a workbook that could be used by all colleges.

Conclusion

As outlined in this study, there is still a variety of issues and challenges to be addressed in order to ensure the effectiveness of WIL in TVET colleges. What remains for the foreseeable future is to conduct further research aimed at finding and disseminating innovative ways and strategies to successfully implement WIL in TVET colleges. All parties and stakeholders should join together to give students real opportunities to improve their lives through quality education. In the final analysis, the question is not how WIL should be implemented but whether sufficient support is being given to students, lecturers and WIL coordinators by all interest groups in higher education. Only when this line of action is taken can we say that equal opportunities are given to all TVET college students.



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