

A three-way partnership model of tourism graduate employability

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Abstract

The aim of this paper presentation is to show the employability of tourism graduates, using a three-way perspective. The concept of employability differs depending on the context, as well as the views of the people making employment decisions and those seeking employment. Graduates are not always employable, because they lack certain knowledge, skills, employability attributes, and practical work experience. Therefore, it has become imperative to ensure an adequate level of preparedness of tourism graduates, including their employability attributes, to enhance their chances of securing and sustaining employment in the tourism industry. The researcher adopted a sequential explanatory mixed method, which entailed combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The researcher conducted a quantitative survey on a purposive sample of 561 managers, supervisors and owners within the tourism industry and tourism graduates working in the tourism industry. The researcher used means, standard deviations, exploratory factor analysis and independent t-test. The qualitative research approach was applied to investigate graduate employability more in-depth. A total of twelve interviews were conducted with three academics within higher education institutions (HEIs) that offer a tourism qualification, three graduates working within the industry and three experts within the tourism industry. The researcher found a significant relationship between the professional skills, personality traits, knowledge skills and operation skill within the tourism industry. The researcher constructed a model to enhance graduate employability through a three-way perspective within the tourism industry. The model links all three partners (the tourism graduate, tourism industry and Higher education institutions) that play a key role in the industry regarding the transfer of knowledge, skills and other employability attributes. The originality of this paper is that it constructed a model for the tourism industry to enhance graduate employability that links three partners, and creates further constructive debate.

Keywords

employability, tourism industry, higher education, tourism graduates

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to show the employability of tourism graduates, using a three-way perspective, that is based on existing research findings in employability and on the various individual elements that make up the framework. The concept of employability differs depending on the context, as well as the views of the people making employment decisions and those seeking employment. Graduates are not always employable, because they lack certain knowledge, skills, employability attributes, and practical work experience. Therefore, it has become imperative to ensure an adequate level of preparedness of tourism graduates, including their employability attributes, to enhance their chances of securing and sustaining employment in the tourism industry. The tourism industry seeks graduates who possess job-specific skills (Wakelin-Theron, 2015). In addition, the tourism industry prefers candidates with the right knowledge and attributes, as well as additional work- and any form of travel experience, and who have undertaken relevant extra-curricular activities while studying. To have a competitive edge when seeking employment, graduates need to have developed their employability skills and abilities while studying at higher education institutions (HEIs). Various research has been conducted on employability, namely factors affecting (Tomlinson, 2007; Finch, Hamilton, Riley & Zehrer, 2013; Tymon, 2013); industry perception (Sheriff, Kayat & Abidin, 2014) employability in Higher Education (Sheldon, Fesenmaier, Woeber, Cooper & Antonioli, 2007; Solnet, Robinson & Cooper, 2007); Academics Views, (Morrison, 2013). Yet, limited studies have been conducted on partnerships to advance employability.

2. Literature review

The tourism industry is characterised by low remuneration levels, long working hours, seasonal work, high numbers of female employees, and high staff turnover (Wang, Ayers & Huyton, 2008; NDT, 2017). Tourism industry employers have consistently voiced their concerns regarding graduates' lack of ability and the right knowledge, skills, and employability attributes that would make them better employees (Wicramshinghe & Perera, 2010, Wakelin-Theron, 2015). There has been much debate about graduate employability and the misconception that a tourism qualification secures employment (Cranmer, 2006; Rigby, Wood, Clark-Murphy, Daly, Dixon, Kavanagh, Leveson, Petocz, Thomas & Vu, 2010, Wang, Ayres & Huyton, 2010; Wakelin-Theron, 2015). The tourism industry seeks graduates who possess job-specific skills (Wakelin-Theron, 2015). In addition, the tourism industry prefers candidates with the right knowledge and attributes, as well as additional work- and any form of travel experience, and who have undertaken relevant extra-curricular activities while studying. To have a competitive edge when seeking employment, graduates need to have developed their employability skills and abilities while studying at HEIs.

3. Methods

The researcher adopted a sequential explanatory mixed method, which entailed combining quantitative and qualitative methods. During phase 1, 561 respondents completed and returned their questionnaires. The questionnaire contained 33 different dimensions. The respondents rated the various types of knowledge and skills in order of importance on a five-point Likert scale: *Not at all important*, *Low importance*, *Neutral*, *Very important*, and *Extremely important*. Two data sets were merged and the t-test was used, together with the factor analysis, to group a set of observed variables into relationships. To verify that the dataset was appropriate for the application of the factor analysis to the employability items of both the graduates and the tourism industry, internal reliability was tested using the Cronbach coefficient, as the most appropriate method to secure the reliability of the survey research (Maree & Pieterse, 2007). The Cronbach value for Professional skills was 0.828; Operational skills 0.760; Personality traits 0.784 and Knowledge and skills 0.716. The high Alpha value indicated good internal consistency among the number of items. During phase 2, 12 participants were selected from the tourism industry, tourism graduates who are working in the industry as well as tourism academics who are all experts within the tourism industry. The rationale behind this question was to obtain more information about the current practices and perspectives of academics from HEIs, tourism industry participants, and tourism graduates about the knowledge, skills, and employability attributes required of graduates by the tourism industry.

4. Findings

In South Africa, higher education academics, tourism industry employers, and graduates have identified various tourism-related practices, perspectives, and gaps. Research conducted in different geographical regions and industry specific sectors regarding important knowledge and skills clearly shows marked differences between the three parties' perceptions of the particular attributes required (CBI, 2012). The current research corroborates this finding.

The findings of the current study confirmed that, generally, tourism graduates lack work-readiness and experience, as some HEIs do not offer work integrated learning in their tourism qualifications or limited exposure. The findings also corroborated that the tourism industry is well-known for its limited levels of training and lack of the required structure to support HEIs by providing supervisors and mentors to guide students doing practical work. This has led to what some researchers refer to as an 'expectation gap' between tourism graduates and the tourism industry (Wang *et al.*, 2009).

Most HEIs seem to be lagging behind in terms of equipping graduates with the right set of professional and operational knowledge and skills. Some constraints were identified by tourism academics, namely, students' backgrounds, graduates' lack of

or limited exposure to the world of work, students' overall knowledge of the lack of interest in tourism as a discipline, a tourism qualification being a second choice, students' misperceptions regarding tourism careers. Some academics mentioned the difficulty of finding tourism academics with practical industry experience, and traditional teaching methods not developing employability skills sufficiently. In the current time of rapid technological change and advancements, disruptive technology are taking over or as it is better known as one academic mentioned "disruptology" and with this, additional skills sets are necessary. Some HEIs find it difficult to adjust their curricula every time IT advances occur. In other words, it is difficult for HEIs to keep up with the fast pace of change within the tourism industry. Yet, to become more competitive and to build greater reputation HEI need to adjust module content, assessment practices, pedagogy and align with industry demand.

Tourism industry experts indicated that they seek graduates with differentiating qualities and a variety of soft skills. The absence of these prioritised skills results in a mismatch that could limit graduates' opportunities. Clearly, the growth path in the tourism sector is dominated by privately owned enterprises. Government has established various policies and initiatives to support the tourism industry (DEAT, 2008). However, these policies and initiatives do not seem to have been well executed or operationalised. The tourism industry is generally affected by negative perceptions about its recruitment methods, employment practices, and working conditions and atypical employment. Hence, work in the tourism industry is often referred to as 'atypical employment.' This is perceived negatively, and it significantly influences job quality. However, part-time work or seasonal work, which is a form of atypical employment that tends to receive a mixed response, could also contribute to an individual's knowledge and skills acquisition. Therefore, students should consider appropriate and relevant part-time work while studying, to enhance their chances of securing employment after graduation.

Tourism graduates perceive themselves as readily employable. They expect to travel the world; yet, they have not participated in tourism and have a limited experience of tourism products and services. The study also revealed that graduates lack tourism-specific IT skills, and have insufficient knowledge of the tourism industry and what is expected of them. They are also concerned about their limited exposure to the real world of work. The general view is that the majority of black tourism graduates have not travelled outside their familiar areas, as their families do not have a culture of participating in tourism. This is due to various reasons, such as the lack of finances, knowledge, as well as travel documentation constraints, to mention a few. Graduates realise that they require professional, operational, and practical skills, and, in some instances, appropriate personality traits. Pool and Sewell (2007) emphasise that employability is a lifelong issue; nobody is ever perfectly employable. However, the issue of employability attributes in terms of knowledge and skills continues to reflect a gap with regard to the perceptions of tourism graduates, academics and the tourism industry. This state of affairs has adversely affected the employability of tourism graduates who aspire to work in the tourism industry.

A concerted effort was made to conceptualise the phenomenon of employability and to analyse it within the tourism industry using data gathered from tourism academics, tourism industry representatives and tourism graduates. The objective was to construct a model to enhance graduate employability to enhance graduates' career prospects.

The researcher suggests the adoption of a three-way partnership employability model (see Figure1). This model was developed to support tourism graduates, the tourism industry, and HEIs in their endeavour to enhance graduate employability. The model identifies important knowledge and skills required in the tourism industry and grouped these employability skills under four distinct categories. Additionally, the three-way model provides for collective input, and links approaches and strategic goals geared towards the enhancement of graduate employability.

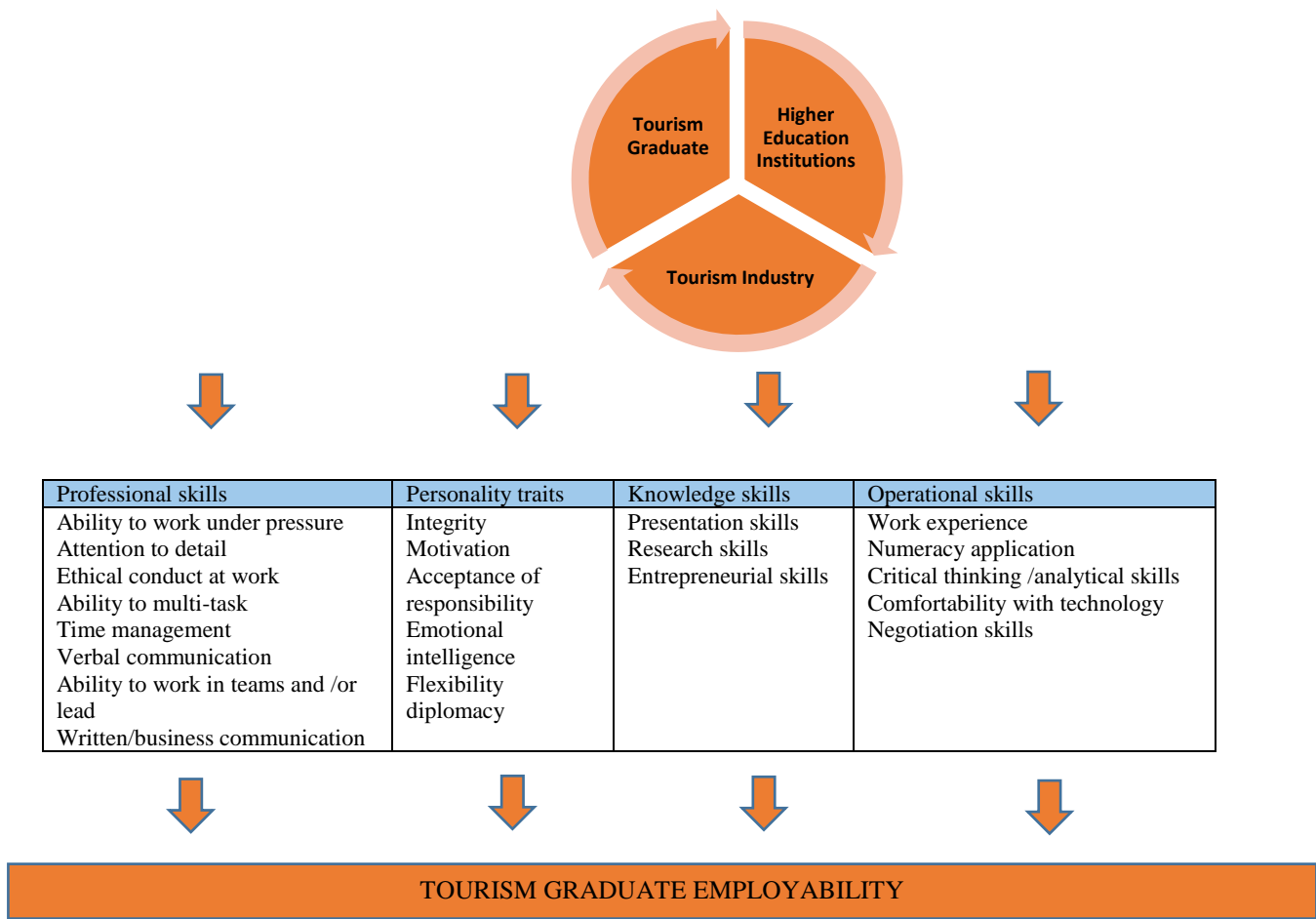


Figure 1. Employability of tourism graduates: A three-way partnership Source: Compiled by researcher

Figure 1 depicts the relationship between the partners. HEIs, the tourism industry, and tourism graduates cannot function effectively in isolation. The three partners must work collaboratively to ensure that graduate employability in the tourism industry is achieved and sustained. The main factors that influence tourism graduate employability are grouped into four categories, namely Professional skills, Personality traits, Knowledge skills, and Operational skills, which enhance tourism graduate employability.

5. Implications

Prior to this research, there was a lack of literature illustrating the skills-based requirements for new graduates into the South Africa's tourism industry. The researcher proposes the above model as a means to enhance graduate employability through a three-way partnership. The model links all three partners (the tourism graduate, HEIs, and the tourism industry) that play a fundamental role in the tourism industry regarding the transfer of knowledge, skills, and other employability attributes. The three-way perspective will help to facilitate the identification of the right set of knowledge, skills, and other employability attributes needed by graduates to secure a job within the tourism industry. It is important that graduates and HEIs are aware of the employability attributes regarded as required by the tourism industry.

6. Conclusions

This paper makes a substantial contribution to understanding tourism graduates' employability challenges by reflecting on the employability attributes, important knowledge, and skills. Graduate employability should become a central concern for government and communities, as South Africa has a large number of graduate youths who are unemployed.

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