

REFLECTING ON INDUSTRY AND STUDENT EXPECTATIONS FOR WORKING IN THE TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The tourism and hospitality industry faces major challenges of which a shortage of professional industry-related skills is probably the most pronounced. Added challenges include recruiting and retaining staff within an industry that is intensely service-driven and customer-oriented. Staff should be suitably qualified and able to cope with the challenges of being service workers. It is thus vital that students who study or intend to study Tourism and/or Hospitality Management should be adequately informed about industry's expectations and challenges, as well as the demanding work environment they can expect once they are employed in the industry. It is also imperative that industry stakeholders clearly articulate what is expected from graduates once they are employed. As there is often a mismatch between what the students and industry expect from each other, the aim of this paper is to address the expectations of both industry stakeholders and students. The study was conducted in the Bloemfontein area of South Africa and respondents included the Tourism Management and Hospitality Management students of the Central University of Technology, Free State (CUT), and selected industry stakeholders. The findings underline the importance of management/technical and people skills in an extremely demanding and labour-intensive industry.

Key words: Student expectations; Industry expectations; Tourism and hospitality industry.

INTRODUCTION

The recent global economic crisis has placed a huge strain on consumer spending worldwide. It is, however, encouraging to note that international tourism to South Africa has grown by 3.3% to 8 339 354 in 2011 (Lamprecht, 2012). In 2012, 9.19 million international tourists visited South Africa, which is 10.2% more than in 2011 (Smith, 2013). Travelling by local tourists has also increased from 13.5% to 13.9%, which supports the notion that tourism can invigorate the economy of countries and local regions (Lamprecht, 2012). Apart from creating much needed job opportunities, the South African tourism industry contributes R65.4 billion to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The hospitality sector is the largest within the tourism industry and employs around 77% of the employees working in the industry (THETA, 2010). Due to the size and scope of the hospitality sector it could be regarded as an industry; hence the term tourism and hospitality industry will apply to this paper.

The influx of international and domestic tourists continuously creates new job opportunities which increase the demand for professionally trained staff in the industry (Jugmohan, 2010). The demand for more professionally trained staff, however, exceeds the supply and the Solidarity Research Institute (2008) reported on skill shortages in South Africa has already indicated that the hospitality industry is suffering from a serious skills deficit, which includes a critical shortage of managers. Skills shortages are not the only problems the industry face. Literature indicates that there are persisting challenges pertaining to talent management, employee retention, job satisfaction and morale (Chiang *et al.*, 2005; Deery, 2008; Maxwell & MacLean, 2008; Maier, 2009). The situation is further complicated by persisting negative perceptions about working in the industry. Wood (1997) assessed documentation dating from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s and reports that hospitality work is regarded as “largely exploitative, degrading, poorly paid, unpleasant, insecure and taken as a last resort” (Wood, 1997:1). This corresponds with the notion that the tourism and hospitality industry are synonymous with employing low skilled workers (Shaw & Williams, 1994; Westwood, 2002; Solnet & Hood, 2008).

Considering the size and scope of the tourism and hospitality industry, as well as its positive contribution to job creation and the economic upliftment of both rural and urban communities, the industry cannot afford not to employ suitably qualified employees (Maumbe & Van Wyk, 2011). Universities are usually tasked with providing suitably qualified employees to business and industry and one way of doing this is to clarify what industry expects from graduates and vice versa. Students that study or intend to study Tourism and/or Hospitality Management need to be adequately informed about the inherent challenges associated with working in the industry. This includes the hectic working conditions and long work hours associated with working in the industry. A troubling finding is reported by two recent studies, one in the Malaysian and the other in the Australian context (Richardson, 2009; Richardson & Butler, 2011), namely that Tourism and/or Hospitality Management students do not regard a career in the industry as a viable option. Reasons cited were work-life conflict due to long and hectic work hours and relationship problems between employees and managers. A study by Chuang (2011) confirms these reasons but also adds poor financial compensation and a lack of opportunities for career advancement to the list of challenges.

Providing suitably trained employees to business and industry is an on-going concern for universities and it is imperative that the skills universities impart to students are in juxtaposition of what industry requires (Kokt *et al.*, 2012). This investigation focuses on the Central University of Technology, Free State (CUT), one of six Universities of Technology (UoTs) in the South African context. UoTs dove-tail theory and practice in providing business and industry with applicable work place skills and innovation-oriented, applied research (Moraka & Hay, 2009). Both Tourism Management and Hospitality Management students at CUT are exposed to working in industry (through Work-integrated learning - WIL) and with the community (through service learning). WIL is used as an umbrella term to describe curricular, pedagogic and assessment practices across a range of academic disciplines, as students are exposed to working in business and industry (CHE, 2010). Whereas service learning is a pedagogical practice that integrates service and academic learning to promote increased understanding of course content, while helping students develop knowledge, skills and capacities to deal effectively with problems (CHE, 2010).

Tourism students have six months WIL exposure and hospitality students twelve months. Both Tourism Management and Hospitality Management students have six months service learning exposure.

Taking into consideration the skill shortages that plague the industry it is imperative that the training provided to prospective entrants are current and what industry requires. The study thus reports on a fundamental issue that impacts the longevity and sustainability of the tourism and hospitality industry. The research methodology comprised of a quantitative research design and data was captured by means of two structured questionnaires – one administered to all undergraduate Tourism and Hospitality students at the CUT and the other to selected industry stakeholders in the Bloemfontein area. Although the use of one UoT could be viewed as a limitation, the findings nevertheless provide useful insight into the expectations of industry and students, alike.

GRADUATE SKILLS FOR WORKING IN TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

As indicated before, recruiting and retaining suitably qualified graduates are a major concern for the tourism and hospitality industry. Shortages in skilled staff are reported in both the South African (THETA, 2010) and international (Ricci, 2010; Richardson & Butler, 2011) arenas. Blomme (2006) reported that up to 70% of graduates leave the industry within six years after graduation, while Chuang (2011) estimated the drop-out rate to be between three and five years. Also, it is estimated that each case of staff turnover – especially on management levels – costs in the vicinity of R240 000 (£20 000) (Lamprecht, 2012).

A successful career in the tourism and hospitality industry involves the mastery of certain critical skills. A career can be described as the work-related experiences that span an individual's lifetime and a skill is a learned capacity to carry out a particular action (Noe *et al.*, 2008). A variety of research studies have been conducted on graduate skills in the tourism and hospitality industry. Knutson and Patton (1992) identified human resources skills and the ability to interact with guests as the most crucial skills applicable to tourism and hospitality work. In later years the importance of people management skills (or 'soft skills') was highlighted – particularly interpersonal skills, leadership skills, problem-solving skills and decision-making skills (Nelson & Dopson, 1999; Connolly & McGing, 2006). People management skills are deemed indispensable for an industry that is almost entirely based on customer satisfaction and service delivery.

To add to this conception, Raybould and Wilkins (2006) compiled a list of generic skills which are needed for graduates who wish to enter the industry. These include oral communication skills, written communication skills, self-management skills, problem-solving skills, conceptual skills, analytical skills, information management skills, the ability to work as part of a team, leadership skills, interpersonal skills, adaptability and a willingness to learn. The attitudes of tourism and hospitality employees towards customer service and excellence are especially crucial. In this regard, Connolly and McGing (2006) noted that the industry requires well-grounded graduates who have developed a good balance between analytical and people skills. Chen and Cursoy (2007) concur by stating that students should not only have

operational skills, but also management skills in order to work successfully in the tourism and hospitality industry.

Raybould and Wilkins (2006) identified 10 skill descriptors related to the requirements from industry. This includes dealing effectively with customers, maintaining professional and ethical standards, operating calmly in crises situations, showing empathy, demonstrating listening skills, the ability to anticipate client needs, time management skills, cultural awareness, the ability to communicate effectively and the ability to work without close supervision. These skill descriptors served as conceptual guide for the industry-expectation questionnaire in the empirical part of the study. In their investigation on graduate education in Ireland, Connolly and McGing (2006) found that the hospitality industry is an important stakeholder in hospitality education and that the industry requires hands-on skills and well-developed people skills. The study further suggests that the needs of industry should be prominent in designing curricula for hospitality management courses and that there should be an increased emphasis on industry placements where students can gain practical experience.

More skills training, case study-related assignments and the involvement of industry representatives should further enhance industry exposure and input. Raybould and Wilkins (2006) concede that hospitality curricula should meet both the needs of industry and those of students. The role of educators is especially crucial in ensuring that tourism and hospitality graduates have realistic expectation of the industry (Richardson, 2009; Richardson & Butler, 2011). Ricci (2010) notes that hospitality schools should highlight the various speciality options in hospitality training demanded from industry. Chuang *et al.* (2007) advocate for proper career guidance at university level and that career assistance programmes should be implemented to assist students in making appropriate career choices.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This investigation aimed to ascertain the expectations of Tourism and Hospitality Management students related to working in the industry, as well as what industry expects from graduates. Data collection comprised of two questionnaires: one administered to undergraduate Tourism Management and Hospitality Management students (enrolled for 2012), at the CUT and the other administered to industry stakeholders in the Bloemfontein area.

The student expectations questionnaire was based on the work of Lu and Adler (2009) and Richardson and Butler (2011). It measured the main reasons why students wanted to pursue a career in the industry. It also ascertained the sector in which students wanted to work and the positions they would prefer to commence with once they completed their studies. Students also had to indicate the positions they would like to attain in the course of their careers. Of the 323 students enrolled for undergraduate study at the CUT, 213 completed the questionnaire, representing a response rate of 66%. The industry expectation questionnaire was based on the work of Raybould and Wilkins (2006) and included 10 skill descriptors required by industry from graduates. It measured descriptors on a 4-point Lickert scale (1=don't know, 2=Not important, 3=Important and 4=Very important).

For the sake of this investigation, industry stakeholders included employers that are likely to employ graduates and comprised of graded accommodation establishments in the

Bloemfontein area, the food and beverage sector, convention and event management companies, travel agencies, tourist attractions and tourism and hospitality education. Only participants that had a formal and/or informal association with the CUT's Hotel School were targeted. Letters of invitation to participate in the study was sent to the entire population and was addressed to the owners/managers of the businesses. Of the 121 industry participants that were targeted, 40 respondents completed the questionnaire, yielding a response rate of 33%. A quantitative analysis of the findings was made possible, as two structured questionnaires were utilised as part of data gathering (Tewksbury, 2009). Data were analysed using SAS Version 9.2 where a combination of descriptive and inferential statistics (including a pro-max rotated factor analysis) were applied.

RESULTS

Data analysis: Student expectations

The first question of the student expectation questionnaire intended to measure the main reason why students wanted to pursue a career in the tourism and hospitality industry. From a list of 12 options students had to select the 1 main reason why they wanted to pursue a career in Tourism and Hospitality Management. The responses are reflected in Table 1.

TABLE 1: STUDENTS: MAIN REASONS PURSUEING A CAREER IN TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

| Main reasons | Frequency | Percentage |
|--|-----------|------------|
| To start my own business in the tourism and hospitality industry. | 61 | 29.47% |
| To have opportunities to travel and/or work in exotic destinations. | 48 | 23.19% |
| To interact with clients and customers and to provide excellent service. | 25 | 12.08% |
| To continuously develop and refine my skills and expertise. | 16 | 7.73% |
| To attain a well-paying position. | 15 | 7.25% |
| To become a supervisor/manager. | 11 | 5.31% |
| To attain balance between career and family responsibilities. | 6 | 2.90% |
| To have a stable job in a specific geographical area. | 6 | 2.90% |
| To impart my knowledge to students and to train them to work in the tourism and/or hospitality industry. | 6 | 2.90% |
| To work in a vibrant and supporting environment. | 5 | 2.42% |
| To be able to work in a flexible working environment (flexible working hours). | 4 | 1.93% |
| To be exposed to challenges and finding solutions. | 4 | 1.90% |

It is clear from the responses in Table 1 that the majority of the students want to start their own business in the tourism and hospitality industry (29.47%), followed by the opportunity to travel to and/or work in exotic destinations (23.19%) and to interact with customers and to provide excellent service (12.08%). In a similar study conducted in the Australian context, Richardson (2009) found that the most important factor for students who wanted to pursue a career in the tourism and hospitality industry was to attain a well-paying position, followed by reasons such as promotion opportunities, job security and work environment. It is evident that the respondents of this investigation had different reasons for pursuing a career in the tourism and hospitality industry compared to the findings of Richardson (2009).

Students were also asked to indicate the sector in which they would prefer to work. The majority of respondents wanted to work in the convention and event management sector, followed by the travel sector and the food and beverage sector. The study of Chuang *et al.* (2007) conducted among hospitality management students in the American context found that most students prefer working in the food and beverage sector, followed by lodging and accommodation and then in the convention and event sector. It thus corresponds to a certain extent with the findings of this study.

Students were asked to indicate the positions they intend to take first, as well as the positions they eventually want to attain. Positions were divided into 4 sections: 1) front-line positions (including reception, concierge, waiters, house keepers, tour guides, travel agents and events coordinators); 2) supervisory positions (including being the supervisor of a division, sales representatives, administration officers and human resources officers); 3) management positions (including the front office manager, food and beverage manager, marketing/sales manager, department manager and general manager); and 4) other positions. Table 2 indicates the positions respondents want to commence with and the positions they eventually want to attain.

It emanates from Table 2 and Table 3 that the majority of respondents intend to start with front-line positions, specifically as event coordinators. There are also a substantial number of students (37.56%) who want to start in a management position. It is interesting to note that a significant 32.99% of respondents indicated they intend to remain in front-line positions, while the majority of respondents want to eventually progress to managerial positions. The responses in the 'other' category involve positions outside the tourism and hospitality industry.

TABLE 2: STUDENTS: POSITIONS TO COMMENCE WITH AND WORK TOWARDS

| Starting level | Frequency | Percentage | Towards level | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------------|-----------|------------|----------------|-----------|------------|
| 1. Front line | 106 | 51.71% | 1. Front line | 65 | 32.99% |
| 2. Supervisory | 18 | 8.78% | 2. Supervisory | 10 | 5.08% |
| 3. Management | 77 | 37.56% | 3. Management | 114 | 57.87% |
| 4. Other | 4 | 1.95% | 4. Other | 8 | 4.06% |

TABLE 3: STUDENTS: CROSS-TABLE ON STARTING VS WORKING TOWARDS POSITION

| Starting level | | Towards level | | | | | Total |
|----------------|----------|---------------|-----------|-----------|------------|----------|------------|
| | | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | | |
| Missing values | f | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| | % | 0.0 | 50.0 | 0.0 | 50.0 | 0.0 | |
| 1. Front line | f | 4 | 47 | 3 | 50 | 2 | 106 |
| | % | 3.77 | 44.34 | 2.83 | 47.17 | 1.89 | |
| 2. Supervisory | f | 0 | 4 | 5 | 9 | 0 | 18 |
| | % | 0.0 | 22.22 | 27.78 | 50.0 | 0.0 | |
| 3. Management | f | 6 | 12 | 2 | 54 | 3 | 77 |
| | % | 7.79 | 15.58 | 2.60 | 70.13 | 3.90 | |
| 4. Other | f | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 4 |
| | % | 0.0 | 25.00 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 75.00 | |
| Total | F | 10 | 65 | 10 | 114 | 8 | 207 |

Although small, it may give an indication of students currently in Tourism and Hospitality Management learning programmes who would like to see themselves in a career outside the industry. It is encouraging to note that by far the majority of respondents want to pursue a career in the industry. A chi-square test confirmed a significant difference between starting positions and the positions students are working towards (97.8142; $p < 0.0001$).

Data analysis: Industry expectations

The industry expectation questionnaire aimed to ascertain the main graduate skills which employers require. Most of the respondents were in the graded accommodation sector (32.5%), followed by the food and beverage sector (20%), convention and event management sector (17.5%), travel sector (15%), tourism attractions (10%) and tourism and hospitality education (5%). A variety of graduate skills were put to the respondents. They had to indicate the importance of each skill on a 4-point Likert scale. The responses of the industry stakeholders are detailed in Table 4.

When the mean scores (Table 4) were analysed it became apparent that respondents view dealing effectively with customers as the most important quality that students should have, followed by maintaining professional standards, a positive attitude, adaptability and flexibility and being service-oriented. By reflecting on the inter-quartile range it is also apparent that all the graduate skills, some more than others, are important to industry stakeholders. To establish any underlying graduate skills employers deem crucial, a pro-max rotated factor analysis was performed on the 17 items. A screen plot of eigen values indicated that 2 main factors can be considered for the factor analysis. Table 5 presents the factor loadings per item.

TABLE 4: INDUSTRY STAKEHOLDERS: GRADUATE SKILLS REQUIRED

| Variable | Mean | SD | Median | Inter-quartile range |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|-----------|---------------|-----------------------------|
| Deal effectively with customers | 3.93 | 0.27 | 4.00 | 4.00; 4.00 |
| Maintain professional standards | 3.83 | 0.45 | 4.00 | 4.00; 4.00 |
| Positive attitude | 3.83 | 0.38 | 4.00 | 4.00; 4.00 |
| Adaptability and flexibility | 3.75 | 0.44 | 4.00 | 3.50; 4.00 |
| Behave calmly in crises situations | 3.73 | 0.45 | 4.00 | 3.00; 4.00 |
| Service-oriented | 3.73 | 0.45 | 4.00 | 3.00; 4.00 |
| Listening skills | 3.68 | 0.47 | 4.00 | 3.00; 4.00 |
| Communication skills | 3.65 | 0.48 | 4.00 | 3.00; 4.00 |
| Teamwork skills | 3.65 | 0.48 | 4.00 | 3.00; 4.00 |
| Empathy in dealing with customers | 3.60 | 0.50 | 4.00 | 3.00; 4.00 |
| Cultural awareness | 3.60 | 0.74 | 4.00 | 3.00; 4.00 |
| Technical skills | 3.58 | 0.50 | 4.00 | 3.00; 4.00 |
| Management skills | 3.53 | 0.55 | 4.00 | 3.00; 4.00 |
| Information and communication skills | 3.40 | 0.59 | 3.00 | 3.00; 4.00 |
| Leadership skills | 3.40 | 0.71 | 3.50 | 3.00; 4.00 |
| Work without supervision | 3.33 | 0.66 | 3.00 | 3.00; 3.00 |
| Possess relevant qualifications | 3.30 | 0.65 | 3.00 | 3.00; 4.00 |

SD= Standard Deviation

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy is a popular diagnostic measure. It is suggested that KMO measures of below 0.50 is unacceptable and the overall KMO measure should be greater than 0.80; however, a measure of above 0.60 is tolerable. The overall KMO measure can sometimes be increased by deleting the offending variables whose KMO value is low.

By using a primary factor loading of 0.4 or above, as minimum criteria, the contributing items to the specific factor are highlighted in Table 5. Ignoring the 3 cross-factors ('Cultural awareness', 'Working without supervision' and 'Empathy in dealing with customers'), 6 and 5 primary factors are identified for factor 1 (management/technical skills), and factor 2 (people skills), respectively.

TABLE 5: ROTATED FACTOR LOADINGS PER ITEM

| Items | Factor1: Management/ Technical skills | Factor2: People skills |
|-------------------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| Culture awareness | 0.69 | 0.40 |
| Management skills | 0.67 | 0.04 |
| Possess relevant qualifications | 0.64 | -0.04 |
| Technical skills | 0.63 | 0.05 |
| Communication) | 0.56 | 0.04 |
| Service-oriented | 0.51 | -0.11 |
| Work without supervision | 0.49 | 0.42 |
| Adaptable and flexible | 0.47 | 0.17 |
| Communication and technology skills | 0.17 | 0.13 |
| Listening skills | -0.05 | 0.76 |
| Maintain professional standards | -0.10 | 0.67 |
| Behave calmly in crisis situations | -0.04 | 0.63 |
| Leadership skills | 0.47 | 0.62 |
| Teamwork skills | 0.06 | 0.62 |
| Empathy in dealing with customers | 0.41 | 0.41 |
| Deal effectively with customers | 0.10 | 0.32 |
| Positive attitude | 0.22 | 0.30 |

Kaiser's Measure of Sampling Adequacy: Overall MSA= 0.598

DISCUSSION

Due to the demanding nature of the tourism and hospitality industry and the serious skills shortages the industry face, it is imperative that both students and the industry reflect on what they expect from each other. Data gathering for this study involved administering two questionnaires, namely one to undergraduate Tourism and Hospitality Management students at CUT and the other to industry stakeholders in the Bloemfontein area. As indicated before, the Tourism and Hospitality Management undergraduate programmes of the CUT incorporate a strong vocational and hands-on approach in an attempt to produce graduates who are able to cope with the demanding work environment associated with the industry. This corresponds with the opinion of Connolly and McGing (2006), who advocate a vocational approach to training tourism and hospitality graduates.

The analysis of the findings from the student expectation questionnaire shows that most students studying Tourism and Hospitality Management at the CUT would like to start their

own businesses, followed by travelling to exotic destinations. This is in contrast to a similar study conducted by Richardson and Butler (2011) in the Australian context, which found the main reason as to why students pursue a career in the tourism and hospitality industry was to attain a well-paying position with promotion opportunities. It is fairly easy to start a small business in the industry in the South African context, which may account for students' desire to be entrepreneurial. From a sectorial perspective it is clear that the majority of respondents want to work in the convention and event management sector. In order to address this need, the CUT is currently undertaking the development of a unique diploma in Event Management in consultation with major industry partners.

The demanding nature of the industry is globally recognised being that of a hectic work environment characterised by long and irregular hours. A notable exception is the teaching field. A study by Chen and Gursoy (2007) found that graduates who worked in a teaching environment were generally more satisfied with their jobs in what they term the 'leisure, recreation and tourism industry'. The respondents were also less concerned with high-paying salaries and enjoyed imparting their knowledge in an educational context.

The responses of the student expectation questionnaire revealed that 37.56% of students were intent on starting their career in a managerial position. This indicates that students may not have accurate expectations, again emphasising the importance of educators in providing accurate information to graduates (Richardson, 2009; Richardson & Butler, 2011). Richardson (2009) found that, as students gain more experience in progressing with their studies, the more negative they become regarding their career opportunities in the industry. Chuang *et al.* (2007) concur by stating that first- and second-year students have a narrower range of career expectations compared to senior students, as senior students had more exposure to the industry. On a practical level, tourism and hospitality schools should facilitate frequent interaction between students and the respective industries through, for example, guest lectures from industry specialists, arranging industry days for students, and tutorials. This could bridge the gap between perception and reality in the sense that industry leaders can inform students of the realities and their expectations of new graduates.

It is clear from the responses to the industry expectation questionnaire that the ability to deal effectively with customers is the most prominent skill required by industry. This is followed by maintaining professional standards, a positive attitude, adaptability and flexibility and being service-oriented. Though factor analysis it was possible to identify two prominent factors related to the skills industry require from graduates: management/technical skills and people skills. The findings correspond with similar studies conducted on the topic (Raybould & Wilkins, 2006; Lu & Adler, 2009; Richardson & Butler, 2011). The study thus gives credence to the importance of both management/technical skills in an industry that is extremely labour-intensive and people-oriented on the one hand and extensively operational on the other.

CONCLUSION

Tourism and hospitality schools at institutions of higher learning must take cognisance of the graduate skills required by their respective industries. It is of little use training students without taking industry needs into consideration. Students should be closely monitored while

doing WIL and lecturers should also be exposed to industry on a regular and formal basis in order to stay abreast of new trends and needs. By looking at the most important graduate skills needed by industry, as identified in this study, it is clear that Tourism and Hospitality Management training should go beyond mere vocational training to include very specific modules on topics, such as: entrepreneurship, leadership and management; there should be a continuous emphasis on service excellence and customer satisfaction. Although this paper only focused on one university, the findings are never the less important in comprehending the requirements from industry and the expectations from students. It is recommended that future research should include more universities, and not just UoTs, that offer tourism and hospitality programmes.

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