

Tourism Curriculum Enhancement Through Work Integrated Learning Feedback: The Case of a South African Public University



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Abstract

This research investigates the efficacy of integrating work-integrated learning (WIL) feedback mechanisms to enhance the tourism curriculum within a South African public university context. Tourism education plays a crucial role in preparing students for the dynamic and competitive tourism industry. However, there is a recognized need for universities to adapt their curricula to align with industry demands and provide students with practical skills and experiences. Through a case study approach, this research examines the implementation of WIL feedback mechanisms and their impact on curriculum enhancement in a South African public university's tourism program. Data collection methods include interviews, surveys, and document analysis. The findings highlight the significance of WIL feedback in informing curriculum development, improving teaching methodologies, and enhancing students' employability prospects in the tourism sector. The study contributes to the growing literature on WIL and curriculum enhancement within the context of tourism education, particularly in the South African context.

Keywords: Tourism sector; Dynamic nature; Tourism education; Management; Anthropology

Introduction

The tourism industry is defined by its rapid evolution and dynamic nature, demanding graduates with not only theoretical knowledge but also practical skills that align with industry expectations. While there is growing recognition of the benefits of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) in closing the gap between academia and industry, there is a significant problem that persists: the lack of empirical research on the impact of integrating WIL feedback into the tourism curriculum at the university.

Despite the positive associations between WIL and enhanced employability (Gault, Redington & Schangler, 2000), improved curriculum alignment (Scott & McCarthy, 2015), and stronger industry-academia collaboration (Brennan & Little, 2006) documented in the literature, there is a dearth of studies that specifically investigate the outcomes of integrating WIL feedback within the context of the university's tourism education. This absence of research limits the university's ability to strategically enhance its curriculum to cater to the dynamic demands of the industry and to foster the development of graduates who are well-equipped for successful careers in tourism.

The lack of empirical research on this specific aspect leaves a gap in the understanding of how WIL feedback, when incorporated effectively into the tourism curriculum at the university, influences students' skill development, employability, and overall learning experience. This gap is particularly significant as it hinders the university's capacity to make informed decisions on curriculum development that would benefit both students and the industry.

Therefore, it is imperative to investigate the effects of including WIL feedback in the university's tourism curriculum. The study intends to close this knowledge gap by offering practical insights that can direct efforts to improve the curriculum, strengthen industry-academia collaboration, and generate graduates who are not only well-versed in theoretical concepts but also have the practical skills required by the rapidly changing tourism industry.

Research Objectives

The research objectives are:

- i. To review international and South African literature as a baseline for best practices related to tourism WIL programs.
- ii. To investigate empirically the type and scope of recent WIL feedback at a public university in South Africa.
- iii. To propose improved WIL feedback strategies at one South African public university based on the perspectives gained from the literature and recommendations of WIL mentors, coordinators, and students.
- iv. To offer a WIL framework to the tourism department at one public university in South Africa and to other higher education institutions using a similar strategy to improve the integration of WIL into the curriculum of their tourism programs by evaluating the nature of WIL feedback.

Research Design and Methodology

The design and methodology of a research study lay the foundation for the entire investigation, guiding researchers in their pursuit of knowledge. This section begins by exploring theoretical perspectives on the research paradigm, followed by discussions on induction and deduction as logical frameworks for reasoning in research. It then delves into a paradigm that encompasses four crucial elements: epistemology, ontology, methodology, and axiology. Additionally, three classifications relevant to the study, positivist/post-positivist, interpretive/constructivist, and pragmatism are examined. Furthermore, the chapter discusses research approaches and design methodologies, including the mixed-method research approach, the qualitative approach utilizing workshops and group discussions, and the quantitative approach. Finally, the section concludes with a discussion of data analysis, data presentation, validity, reliability, and ethical considerations relevant to this study.

A case study, at a South African University formed the basis for the data collection. This study used a mixed method design of quantitative and qualitative approaches with a triangulation of data collection (quantitative data analysis, workshops and focus group discussion). In this research, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used, because the nature of the research is such that more comprehensive source data was required for analysis. The use of a mixed method enabled the researcher to investigate the responses to the questions from the perspectives of both the students, WIL coordinators and the supervisors. The quantitative and qualitative methods worked in a complementary way and enabled a deeper understanding of the issues. The study followed an exploratory sequential design in two phases namely, a quantitative research approach followed by the qualitative research approach which included two workshops and a focus group discussion.

Methods of data collection included analyzing numerical ratings from the students' logbooks using quantitative descriptive research design including descriptive statistics in the first phase. In the second phase, two workshops and a focus group were used

as means for data collection. Atlas it was used for data analysis using data which was collected from students, WIL supervisors and WIL coordinators. The incremental approach to data collection and analysis across the two phases enabled the progressive compilation of information and appropriate recalibration of data and findings throughout the investigation.

Quantitative Data Analysis

The data contained in the examination of the student's performance by their mentors and the evaluation of the student's experiential tasks and personal skills by the supervisor is quantitative and the researcher will employ descriptive statistics to analyze it. Descriptive statistics will be used to provide insight into supervisors' evaluations of student performance, work supervisors' evaluations of students' experiential tasks and personal abilities and students' self-evaluation. Conner and Johnson (2017) claim that descriptive statistics do exactly what they say they do, which is to analyze, describe, define, and enable the explanation of data in ways that are more understandable. Naturally, the summaries include numerical information and visualizations like graphs and charts.

Based on the description above and for purposes of this study, the type of descriptive statistical analysis will focus on sorting and illustration of the data. They help us understand and describe the aspects of a specific set of data by providing brief observations and summaries about the sample, which can help identify patterns. For analysis purposes, the study will use descriptive statistics namely measures of frequency (frequency and percent) and measures of central tendency (mean, median and mode).

Qualitative Data Analysis

The study will use Atlas it to conduct an approximate data analysis using the data collected from students, WIL supervisors, and two WIL coordinators. The program Atlas. it is an illustration of Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS), which has been used by experts and many researchers from a variety of knowledge fields, including healthcare professionals like nurses, doctors, and psychologists as well as education, engineering, criminology, management, and anthropology (Flick 2009; Friese, 2014).

Conclusion

This research aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on work-integrated learning and curriculum enhancement within the context of tourism education. By exploring the implementation of WIL feedback mechanisms in a South African public university setting, this study seeks to provide insights into best practices and challenges associated with integrating WIL into the curriculum. Ultimately, the findings of this research will inform strategies for enhancing the tourism curriculum and improving students' employability prospects in the dynamic and competitive tourism industry.



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