

Tracy Daniels / Tembi Tichaawa / Diane Abrahams

Perceptions of Industry Engagement in Tourism and Hospitality Studies in South Africa

Abstract

This research aimed to determine student and industry perceptions of industry engagement in tourism and hospitality studies in South Africa. The study applied a mixed methodology to ascertain these perceptions to determine how industry engagement can be enhanced in order to produce work-ready, employable and entrepreneurial graduates, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on 420 valid surveys conducted with students across six universities, the key findings suggest that students perceive that their universities sufficiently and effectively provide them with the necessary soft skills, practical skills, creativity skills, and personal responsibility tools through industry engagement activities. Respondents agreed that universities are actively preparing tourism and hospitality students for the world of work and assisting them with career development through industry engagement. The study concludes that the benefits of industry engagement for students include inter alia academic progress, personal development, career planning and workplace exposure, as well as the development of key skills and competencies.

Keywords: industry engagement, experiential learning, tourism and hospitality, South Africa

1. Introduction

The tourism and hospitality sectors are widely considered to attract dynamic and young graduates trained in the necessary skills and competencies required for success (Teng, 2013; Kim, 2014). The study of competencies required by students in tourism and hospitality began in the 1980s and has since grown in scope and nature (Susaeta et al., 2020). The responsibility of training and preparing these graduates lies with higher education institutions (Robinson et al., 2016), which need to develop critical and reflective thinkers who will manage the dynamic environment in which they will be required to work (Major & Evans, 2008; Dredge et al., 2014). As fields of academic study, tourism and hospitality are considered applied subject areas which demand that students, academics and curricula have close links with industry. Richardson (2008) states that for higher education institutions to equip graduates effectively, they need to provide them with real world views of actual work environments. Recognizing this, tourism and hospitality executives often turn to higher education institutions for the recruitment of qualified employees who are crucial to business success (Yavas et al., 2013). Despite this, higher education linkage strategies to enterprises are often unplanned, short term and haphazard with limited focus, resources and commitment (Cooper & Westlake, 1998; Solnet, 2004; Busby, 2005). Where industry engagement strategies are in place, these are most commonly in the form of industry placement, internships or work-integrated learning models (Busby, 2005). According to Solnet et al. (2007), this ad hoc approach to industry engagement represents the old way of thinking around industry

Tracy Daniels, Lecturer and Researcher, University of Johannesburg, School of Tourism and Hospitality, Johannesburg, South Africa; e-mail: tracyd@uj.ac.za

Tembi Tichaawa, PhD, Corresponding author, Full professor, University of Johannesburg, School of Tourism and Hospitality, Johannesburg, South Africa; ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1913-3730>; e-mail: tembit@uj.ac.za

Diane Abrahams, PhD, Professor, University of Johannesburg, School of Tourism and Hospitality, Johannesburg, South Africa; e-mail: dabrahams@uj.ac.za

engagement, centered on the completion of a set number of engagement hours but with little consideration for the quality of the experience, which is essential for graduation and student success in the industry. Industry engagement is an experiential learning tool that provides students with opportunities to experience concepts first-hand, giving them a richer and more meaningful understanding of theories learned and witnessing how these theories operate in the real world (Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012). Early definitions of experiential learning presented it as learning in which the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied in contrast to these realities only being heard, spoken or written about (Keeton & Tate, 1978). March (2010) posits that in contrast to academic knowledge which is generated by systematic observation and analysis, experiential knowledge is gained through lessons extracted from life and work. This type of learning enhances the quality of the course content as students are engaged in solving problems and allowed to gain significant personal insights (Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

Industry engagement in tourism and hospitality studies is necessary for higher education institutions to produce graduates who possess both personal and job competencies necessary for success (Guthrie, 2009; Wang & Tsai, 2012). The employability of graduates is a critical issue for higher education institutions in South Africa (Saunders & Zuzel, 2010). Employability is defined as a set of achievements, skills understandings, and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy (Yorke & Knight, 2006). The key reason that students invest in university education is to improve their level of employability and enhance employability prospects, meaning that universities must actively evolve and consider employability issues with a focus on equipping students with key skills for their success (Brown, 2007; Jennings et al., 2015; Stierand & Zizka, 2015; Whitelaw & Wrathall, 2015). Employability competencies can be categorized into personal and job competencies that should always be balanced (Guthrie, 2009). These competencies can be further divided into core items and advancing items where core skills meet job requirements and advancing items refer to the specific skills needed for a particular industry (Ohio State University, 1995). Extensive research has shown the direct link between core skills and a successful career (McCabe, 2008; McCabe & Savery, 2007; Pool & Sewell, 2007), but the influence of personal and job competencies cannot be underestimated (Sisson & Adams, 2013).

The onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 devastated the tourism and hospitality industries across the globe as governments implemented policies to restrict the movement and gathering of people (Evans et al., 2020; Swart & Maralack, 2020; Gössling et al., 2021). Within the burgeoning industry discussions and research about tourism and COVID-19, there is a unanimous call to see and use the pandemic as a transformative opportunity (Mair, 2020). The fundamental changes that the pandemic has made to the tourism and hospitality industries require that graduates possess new critical skills necessary for employment, encompassing not only job-related skills but also including soft skills that employers are actively seeking (Bilsland et al., 2020). In order to achieve these skills, students must participate in industry engagement and experiential learning practices through which they can develop workplace skills, absorb the identity and attitudes of professionals in the industry, transition between education and employment, gain an authentic understanding of potential career paths, interact with customers and gain self-confidence (Wiseman & Page, 2001; Tse, 2010; Jackson, 2015; Roy & Sykes, 2017; Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018).

Although several studies have confirmed that higher education institutions do equip tourism and hospitality students for the world of work through work-integrated learning and other industry engagement activities (Kember & Leung, 2005; Barrie, 2006; Hind et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2007), few studies have been conducted in the context of COVID-19 and focusing on students' perceptions of this topic. Despite this, there remains a general concern around students' perceptions of the extent to which the curricula of higher education institutions prepare them for the world of work. The present study uses quantitative methods, taking on a practical and theoretical approach to identify student perceptions of industry engagement in tourism and

hospitality studies at various higher education institutions in South Africa. As part of its contribution to the existing body of knowledge, the study highlights the importance of using industry engagement to develop critical skills necessary for graduates' success and to increase employability.

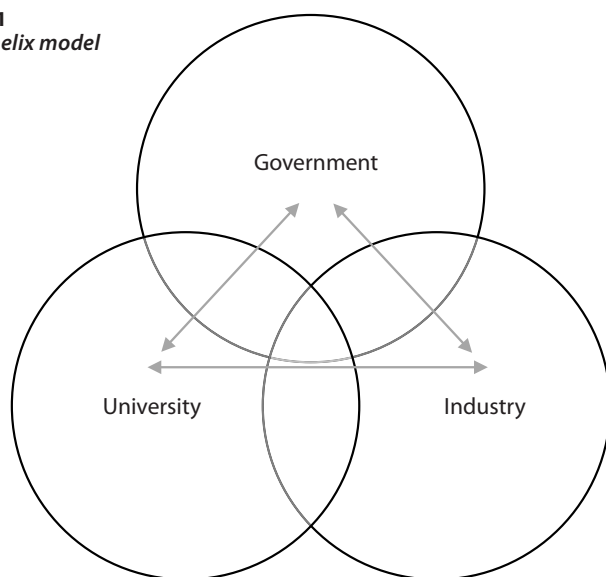
2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Triple helix and the knowledge triangle

Researchers have widely acknowledged the benefits of the involvement of a range of stakeholders in knowledge creation and transfer processes (e.g. Cooper & Westlake, 1998; Etzkowitz, 2003; Blitzer & Botha, 2011; Secolsky & Denison, 2012; Seppo & Lilles, 2012; Riebe & Jackson, 2014; Jackson, 2015; Tran, 2016; Unger & Plot, 2017; Gasmi & Bouras, 2018). Within tourism and hospitality studies, various role players have a significant function in developing curricula, including government, industries, students, and the universities themselves (Cooper & Westlake, 1998). The most commonly cited concept regarding university-enterprise collaboration is the knowledge triangle and the triple helix (Etzkowitz, 2003; Seppo & Lilles, 2012; Bektas & Tayauova, 2014; Unger & Plot, 2017).

Etzkowitz (2003) describes the triple helix model (Figure 1) as one that "postulates that the interaction in university-industry-government is the key to improving the conditions for innovation in a knowledge-based society".

Figure 1
Triple helix model

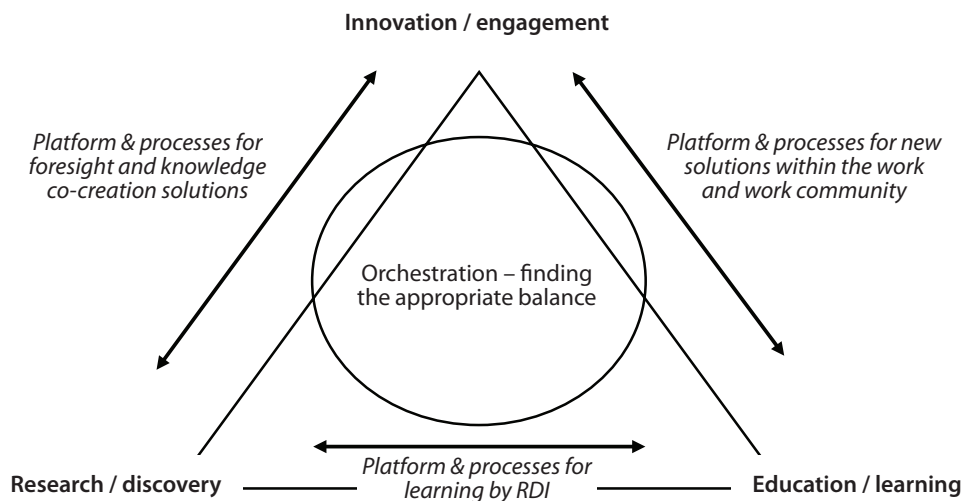


Source: Bektas & Tayauova (2014).

In this helix, the industry is the locus of production. The role of universities is to source new knowledge and technology, while the government acts as the facilitator through the development of policy and frameworks (Etzkowitz, 2003). According to Unger and Plot (2017), closely linked to the triple helix is the knowledge triangle, which is a functional model of how these stakeholders interact with each other through research and education, research and innovation, as well as education and training. One of the biggest challenges in this collaboration is 'involving students as co-creators of knowledge' (Unger & Plot, 2017), as well as the mismatch between industry expectations of graduates and the ability of universities to equip them with the necessary skills (Riebe & Jackson, 2014). More recent research has established that these challenges can be overcome by implementing student-centred learning practices such as inquiry learning (Ritalahti, 2015).

Through this kind of learning, the student is more actively involved in the learning process, and the development of experimental and analytical skills is favored over knowledge retention and content-focused approaches (Ritalahti, 2015). Such learning produces innovative, adaptable, and resilient graduates, making them more valuable and appealing to potential employers (Tran, 2016). How the above stakeholders interact with each other through research and education, research and innovation, and education and training is illustrated in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2
The knowledge triangle



Source: Unger & Plot (2017).

2.2. University enterprise collaboration (UEC)

The theory of University Enterprise Collaboration (UEC) provides the foundation for universities to transfer knowledge and technology to stimulate research and improve curricula (Tran, 2016). Over the last 30 years, universities have shifted from a teaching paradigm to a student-centered paradigm (Zhang et al., 2020). Within this new paradigm, the university's role is not only to teach but also to provide students with an optimal learning environment that promotes self-learning and development (Lin, 2017). Lin (2013) stated that new learning paradigms and approaches have been adopted through student-centered learning, such as problem-based learning, case-based learning, project-based learning, and experimental learning. The success of these learning practices depends on collaboration between universities and industry to provide resources and cases that can be directly used in teaching and learning processes (Zhang et al., 2020).

UEC is a pedagogical approach that focuses on cultivating innovative graduates with a high level of practical skills. These graduate capabilities are achieved by utilizing resources from both universities and industry (Liu & Zhong, 2011). According to Toor and Ofori (2008), this collaboration between the university and relevant enterprises results in developing competent and skilled professionals who also possess strong leadership skills. In order for UEC to be successful and to produce ready-to-work graduates, what is necessary is the provision of programs that combine and integrate learning and workplace applications; the blending of professional knowledge and authentic application, as well as the provision of valuable opportunities to learn the tacit knowledge inherent in the workplace (Bektas & Tayauova, 2014).

There are several ways in which universities and enterprises can collaborate, and this engagement can come from either party (Table 1). Where the university initiates this engagement, the focus is on work placements

for students, internships and students working on real-life cases. When enterprises are involved in university activities, this is most often for curriculum development, advisory boards, mentoring, input on assessments, guest lecturing, scholarships or graduate recruitment (Tran, 2016). These activities' core is knowledge transfer between universities and enterprises through various practices and channels (Seppo & Lilles, 2012).

Table 1
Types of university enterprise collaboration

	Types of EUC
Universities going out	Student work placements Student internships Students conducting real-life projects in a firm University academics/managers experience working in firms
Enterprise engagement in university practices	Employer involvement in: Curriculum development Degree advisory boards Student assessment Guest lectures Student mentoring Career fairs or events Scholarships Graduate recruitment
Universities and firms collaborate to deliver	Work-based learning degree programs Research and development activities Practical projects either on university campus or in enterprises

Source: Seppo & Lilles (2012).

3. Methods

The research design of this study consisted of a mixed-methods approach to reveal the perceptions of students and industry members. Mixed methods research allows the researcher to use elements of both qualitative and quantitative research approaches to enhance the breadth and depth of the research and for corroboration (Khoo-Lattimore et al., 2019). For the quantitative aspect of the study, participants included students at six South African higher education institutions offering qualifications in tourism and hospitality, as well as industry stakeholders and university alumni currently working in the tourism and hospitality industries. Quantitative methods were used to collect data through a research questionnaire from current tourism and hospitality students in South Africa to seek and obtain accurate and reliable measurements that allow for statistical analyses (Queiros et al., 2017). The questions contained in the questionnaire were divided into categories of student perceptions of university reputation, employment in their chosen field study, work readiness training and preparation, the development of soft and practical skills, career preparation and personal development. Qualitative methods were implemented through key informant interviews conducted with industry representatives to understand better the phenomenon under study through the experience of those who have direct experience with this phenomenon. The interview schedule for the key informant interviews was designed to garner information on university-industry collaboration, students' employability, student competencies required for success and the impacts of the COVID 19 pandemic on these themes.

The research questionnaire and the interview schedule used for the research were designed to offset method biases, for research triangulation and to enhance and clarify the results from one method with the results from another (Greene, 2007). This provides a richer and deeper understanding of the topic and allows for a more complex and holistic picture to be developed (Greene, 2007; Queiros et al., 2017; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). This type of research design was selected to ensure that the research objectives were met and that the research questions were answered appropriately.

Quantitative data for the current study was collected using an online questionnaire at the end of the 2020 academic year. The questionnaire was structured to gather information regarding student perceptions and expectations of employability and awareness, knowledge and perceptions of employability, skills development and various initiatives offered within their institutions. In the questionnaire, students were requested to rate these perceptions using a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 4=Agree and 5= Strongly agree.

In-depth interviews were conducted online using semi-structured questions, which were designed considering the aims and objectives of the study (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Through the interviews, a better understanding of the perceptions of industry members was gained. The interview schedule used for the interviews was designed to gather data regarding current collaboration activities with higher education institutions as well as information on employability activities and future plans. Key informants were selected based on their relationship with higher education institutions offering tourism and hospitality qualifications in South Africa and based on their positions within the industry.

The data collection for the study took place during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa - a time when perceptions of industry engagement in tourism and hospitality studies were of great importance as students began expressing doubts and concerns around future employability in these industries. Higher education facilities also noted a drop in the confidence levels of tourism and hospitality students as these industries were devastated by the pandemic. The target respondents for the questionnaire were students enrolled for qualifications in tourism and hospitality management at six South African higher education institutions. Of the student respondents, 420 usable responses were received. Respondents for the key informant interviews were South African tourism and hospitality industry members, some of which were alumni of the higher education institutions included in the study. A total of 17 interviews were conducted.

The data analysis procedures used for the quantitative data included two steps. The first step involved descriptive statistics which were conducted on the socio-demographic characteristics of the survey respondents. Following this, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted on three sets of Likert scale questions based on perceptions of work readiness and industry engagement activities offered by universities. The items were factor analyzed to test for construct validity and determine underlying dimensions. Principle component analysis along with the Varimax rotation method was used. The results are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2
Exploratory factor analysis

Scale name	Cronbach alpha value	Number of items
Universities going out Student perceptions of university preparation for the workplace		
University reputation	0.841	6
Employment in the field of study	0.693	3
Work readiness training and preparation	0.731	4
Student perceptions of the development of soft skills		
Soft skills	0.911	11
Practical skills	0.897	10
Creativity	0.861	3
Personal responsibility	0.827	3
Career preparation	0.868	3
Student perceptions of personal development		
University's role in work readiness and preparation	0.918	11
Career development	0.845	10
Relevance of qualification	0.797	4
Current employment status	0.800	2

The Kaiser-Meyer Olkin test was conducted to check whether the sample for the study was suitable and adequate for the EFA. Following this, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was conducted and supported the factorability for the correlation matrix (Field, 2000). Once the adequacy of the sample was confirmed, the EFA was conducted using first-order Varimax rotation and second-order direct oblimin rotation in order to present the pattern of loadings on various factors. Three factors were removed for low measures of sampling adequacy (>0.6), leaving eleven factors (presented in Table 2).

Reliability is concerned with the scale's internal consistency and whether the items measure the same underlying construct. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to test for internal consistency. The response scale used was ordinal. The categories were as follows: Strongly disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neither agree nor disagree (3), Agree (4) and Strongly agree (5). The eleven factors showed good internal consistency with a Cronbach alpha coefficient between 0.693 (~ 0.7) and 0.918. As presented in Table 2, most of the values are above the accepted level of 0.7 (Pallant, 2007).

The first factor was called *university reputation* and contained six items relating to student perceptions of the institution's reputation at which they were studying and how this may influence their post-study employment opportunities. The second factor, *employment in the field of study*, consisted of three items based on knowledge of potential employment opportunities. The third factor was labelled *work readiness training and preparation* and contained four items associated with student perceptions on the extent to which their university had prepared them for the world of work and equipped them with the necessary skills for success. The fourth factor, *soft skills*, consisted of eleven items based on student perceptions of the necessary soft skills that the university had equipped them with for success in their chosen industry, such as communication and problem-solving skills. The fifth factor, *practical skills*, contained ten items associated with student perceptions of the necessary practical skills that the university had equipped them with in order for success in their chosen industry. The sixth factor was labelled *creativity* and consisted of three items regarding the level of creativity of students achieved through their university qualifications. The seventh factor was labelled *personal responsibility* and contained three items on students ability to take responsibility for their own professional development. The eighth factor, the *university's role in work readiness and preparation*, contained eleven items based on student perceptions of the tools that their university had equipped them with in order to prepare them for the work environment and ensure that they were work-ready. The ninth factor was called *career development* and included ten items linked to student's personal career development and intended career paths. The tenth factor, the *relevance of qualification*, included four items on how students felt about their chosen field of study. The eleventh and final factor was labelled *current employment status* and contained two items associated with current employment status and industry connections. Interviews conducted for the study were recorded and transcribed, and ATLAS.ti was used to extract the dominant themes in the data. The interview protocol was used as a guide to divide 'questions' into the concepts they tested, separating them into first level groups. This also allowed for the emergence of codes for data analysis. Open coding was used, and patterns were also established from the codes identified through ATLAS.ti.

4. Results

4.1. Socio-demographic profile of respondents

The socio-demographic and purpose-related characteristics of the 420 respondents are presented in Table 3. The age distribution of the student respondents was categorized into four groups. The study reflects that majority of the students were in the age groups between 17 and 25 years. A further breakdown shows that 31% were 17-21 years old, 50.2% were 22-25 years old, 12.4% were in the 26-35 age group, and 4.8% were above 35 years old. The sample had 1.7% of the students omit to capture their age.

Table 3
Respondent's socio-demographic profile

Socio-demographic variable	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Age		
17-21	130	32.6%
22-25	218	50.2%
26-35	52	12.4%
Above 35	20	4.8%
Total	420	100%
Current academic level		
Undergraduate	292	69.5%
Postgraduate	128	30.5%
Total	420	100%
Current employment status		
Employed	97	23%
Unemployed	323	77%
Total	420	100%

4.2. Student perceptions of university preparation for the workplace

The results of the data analysis found that there were notable differences in the students' perceptions on the three sub-factors of university preparation for the workplace across the three age groups of respondents as indicated by p-values of less than 0.05 for university readiness, employment in the field of study and work readiness, training and preparation. Post hoc comparisons found that students from the University of Pretoria had more negative perceptions of university readiness, while University of Zululand students had largely positive perceptions. Students from the University of Johannesburg generally had negative perceptions of obtaining employment in their chosen field of study. This result could be directly related to the perceptions of an actual large scale job loss and unemployment in the tourism and hospitality industries due to the COVID 19 pandemic. In terms of work readiness and training, University of Pretoria students had widely positive perceptions of their institution's efforts while other universities received mixed responses.

4.3. Student perceptions of the development of soft skills

The impacts of the COVID 19 pandemic on the tourism and hospitality industries have resulted in a shift in the way in which these subjects are taught from the more traditional, operational aspects to a greater need for soft skills. The industries now expect students to be adaptive, compassionate and cope well in crisis situations (Joshi & Gupta, 2021). Different responses were received from students regarding their perceptions of the development of soft skills at their universities as indicated by p-values of more than 0.05 for practical skills, creativity and personal responsibility. There were, however, significant differences in soft skills with the p-value of $p=0.008$. The post hoc Scheffe test indicated that students at the Tshwane University of Technology held more positive responses on the development of soft skills than those at other institutions.

4.4. Career preparation

Research from the COVID 19 pandemic has shown that education is key to finding employment in the tourism and hospitality industries during this time (Daly et al., 2020; Jiang & Wen, 2020; Lai & Wong, 2020). This justifies that universities must effectively prepare students for careers in tourism and hospitality to ensure future resilience and the sustainability of these industries (Lopes et al., 2021). During the COVID 19 pandemic, universities are responsible for effectively preparing students for careers in tourism and hospitality by equipping them with the necessary skills to perform specific occupations (Lai & Wong, 2020). Perceptions of career preparation varied amongst respondents, as shown by the p-value of $p=0.00$. The post hoc comparison using the Scheffe test showed that University of Pretoria students were more negative in

their perceptions of career preparation than those at other universities, while students at the University of Zululand and the University of Johannesburg were more positive.

4.5. Student perceptions of personal development

There were significant differences in the students' perceptions of three of the sub-factors of personal development between the institutions, as shown by the p-values of less than 0.05 for university's role in work readiness and preparation, career development and relevance of qualification. There were, however, no notable differences in perceptions of current employment status with a p-value of more than 0.05.

4.6. Working while studying

The independent samples T-Test was used to test for differences in perceptions between students who were employed while studying and those who were not. The test was conducted on the eleven factors, and the results are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4
Differences in student perceptions

T-test for differences in perceptions by employment status				
	Are you working while studying?	N	Mean	p-value
Student perceptions of university preparation for the workplace				
University reputation	Employed	95	3.63	0.01
	Unemployed	308	3.90	
Employment in field of study	Employed	95	3.29	0.22
	Unemployed	305	3.41	
Work readiness training and preparation	Employed	95	3.47	0.43
	Unemployed	314	3.55	
Student perceptions of the development of soft skills				
Soft skills	Employed	94	4.02	0.66
	Unemployed	314	4.15	
Practical skills	Employed	94	4.13	0.77
	Unemployed	314	4.11	
Creativity	Employed	93	4.00	0.14
	Unemployed	314	4.13	
Personal responsibility	Employed	93	4.29	0.45
	Unemployed	314	4.35	
Career preparation	Employed	94	3.51	0.16
	Unemployed	313	3.66	
Student perceptions of personal development				
University's role in work readiness and preparation	Employed	88	3.93	0.37
	Unemployed	295	4.00	
Career development	Employed	89	3.81	0.01
	Unemployed	290	4.02	
Relevance of qualification	Employed	89	3.75	0.03
	Unemployed	289	3.97	
Current employment status	Employed	88	2.97	0.00
	Unemployed	286	2.43	

The findings show differences in student perceptions on university readiness between employed (M=3.63) and unemployed (M=3.90) students. Unemployed students were more positive in their perceptions of university preparedness than those currently employed.

The test revealed no significant difference in the students' perceptions on the two sub-factors of university preparation for the workplace - student perceptions of the development of soft skills and career preparation

between employed and unemployed students as indicated by p-values of more than 0.05. Regarding student perceptions of career development and relevance of qualification, the results revealed significant differences between employed and unemployed students as shown by p-values of $p = 0.01$ and $p = 0.03$, respectively. The mean values show that for career development, the unemployed ($M = 4.02$) had more positive perceptions than the employed ($M = 3.81$). The mean values also show that for the relevance of qualification, the unemployed ($M = 3.97$) had more positive perceptions than the employed ($M = 3.75$). There were no significant differences in the students' perceptions of the university's role in work readiness and preparation and current employment status.

4.7. The views from the tourism and hospitality industry

From the qualitative data, thirty-three codes were identified and categorized under five groups: teaching, employability, collaboration, employability competencies and skills and COVID-19.

These codes are presented in Table 5 below.

Table 5
Codes

Advice to HEIs	Benefits of collaboration with lecturers	Competencies & skills	Formality of collaboration
Advice to students	Benefits of collaboration with enterprises	COVID 19	Intrapreneurship
Advice to industry	Challenges of collaboration	Does organization collaborate	Key factors for successful collaboration
Awareness	Selection of industry & government partners	Employability	Length of collaboration
Personal benefits to the individual	Why collaborate with specific HEIs	Entrepreneurship	Level of study
Personality traits	Work expectations	Soft vs hard sciences for industry	Student selection for collaboration
Reasons for collaboration		Student assessment in collaboration	Students employed from collaboration
Role of technology		Work readiness	
Teaching support			
Types of collaboration			
What students are expected to do in collaboration			

Each interview was analyzed against the research objectives and relevant quotations linked to the appropriate codes. Industry respondents agreed that higher education institution collaboration resulted in various benefits, with the most commonly mentioned benefits being the innovations brought to the industry and the provision of new talent. This is in keeping with Tran (2016), who found that university-industry collaboration is essential for enhancing student graduate employability. In terms of the challenges, those that were mentioned included a lack of well-defined collaboration goals, poor coordination of engagement activities, poor communication, lack of organizational resources, lack of time, high student numbers, inadequate staff numbers, lack of funding, bureaucratic processes, lack of interest and behavior of students, and non-alignment of interests. All but two of the industry representatives interviewed were involved in engagement activities, with one respondent mentioning that:

'The partnership between universities and industry should be built on a simple and proper relationship. The university must benefit something, and the industry should benefit from the university, meaning if the university produces human resources that is the best fit for the industry, that means that the industry benefits and if the industry makes opportunities available for the workplace training and research the university benefits to improve its employability of its students and learners.'

In terms of the length of collaboration, industry respondents felt that this should range from 6 weeks to 6 months, with the possibility of extending this length of time as the collaboration becomes more formalized. The general perception was that where collaboration is more formalized and labor-intensive, this would be better suited to final year undergraduate students because of their perceived readiness. The three most important reasons for collaboration identified were for students to gain practical experience and exposure to

the industry, enrich higher education institutions and organizations with new ideas, and provide a pipeline of new talent that can be developed within an organization. The predominant criteria for selecting students for collaboration and engagement included the field of study, student marks and performance, and industry capacity.

For higher education institutions, one of the main reasons for enhancing industry engagement is to ensure students' employment once they graduate. Key informants stated that the major determinants for employment as a result of industry engagement are (1) the type of collaboration activity and whether or not this trains students sufficiently, (2) field of study which determines availability of jobs, (3) support given to partners within the collaboration, (4) practicality of collaboration - is the collaboration conducive to practical learning, and (5) capacity. In order to increase the chances of employability, one respondent noted that:

'...when students get into a collaboration program, they must have an ability to learn, they have to adapt easily to the rotations of the tasks because they are getting into an environment where there are a lot of tasks that are given to them. They must be ready to combine the theory with the practice, they come from the university and must know how to bridge that gap. One of the things that we always expect from them is that they must take this as a golden opportunity because they need to prove themselves to their potential employer.'

The key competencies and skills desired by industry can be summarized by the following: communication skills, adaptability, attitude, work ethic, technological skills, critical and analytical thinking skills, practical skills, teamwork and entrepreneurial skills. The advice that industry members gave to higher education institutions to make their students more employable was to focus on the importance of the right type of practical skills, provide students with practical experiences, provide opportunities for industry engagement and collaboration, teach the correct and relevant content and equip students with the necessary key competencies.

In light of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism and hospitality industries, respondents noted that there might be a need to reassess employability criteria both from a skill- and personal perspective and encourage innovative thinking and scenario planning. The recommendations made by industry members were that students focus on maintaining a positive, flexible, innovative, creative and willing attitude; position themselves as generalists; capitalize on volunteering opportunities; complete more industry-based projects; build a portfolio of industry engagement, and use opportunities to develop their own businesses. One respondent stated that:

'...particularly now, during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential that we use new digital technology in industry-academic collaboration. This can be used through micro internships, which are conducted completely online, online mentorship sessions, and creating virtual workspaces for students.'

5. Discussion and implications

The current study examined student and industry perceptions of industry engagement in tourism and hospitality studies, particularly in light of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these industries. The tourism and hospitality industries in South Africa have long been recognized for their growth potential and their contribution to the economy since the advent of democracy in the country (Makumbirofa & Saayman, 2018; Visagie & Turok, 2019). Along with this, tourism also accounts for the bulk of the country's service exports (Statistics South Africa [Stats SA], 2018). The current South African policy on tourism for poverty alleviation and job creation states that the tourism and hospitality industries are important tools to address the high levels of unemployment in the country (Rogan, 2018). Existing research indicates that in South Africa, the better educated are more likely to find employment in these industries, making post-school education and training with access to industry vital for graduate success (Saarinen & Rogerson, 2014; Baum, 2015; Bhorat et al., 2016; Booyens, 2020; Rogerson, 2020).

The responses from current tourism and hospitality students on their perceptions of industry engagement differed significantly across the various higher education institutions. This implies a lack of consistency amongst tourism and hospitality offerings in the country. Despite this, there were generally positive perceptions from students regarding the efforts of their universities in preparing them for the workplace, the development of soft skills, career preparation and personal development. Existing research presents a number of factors affecting student participation in industry engagement activities. These factors include perceived value of the experience, financial and personal costs, level of support from their higher education institution, finding the right industry partner to engage with, uncertainty over career aspirations, the pressure of other academic work, time management challenges, a lack of self-confidence when engaging with industry partners and barriers to entry into the industry (Morgan, 2006; Busby & Gibson, 2010; Gannon & Maher, 2012). Higher education institutions must acknowledge these challenges and support students in overcoming them to promote industry engagement and ensure that these activities are successful.

The vast majority of student respondents were not employed while studying, nor had ever volunteered for part-time work while studying. This indicates a low level of industry exposure that universities should counteract through industry engagement activities that form part of curricula. These activities help ensure that students possess the skills necessary for the workplace, encourage deep learning in relation to students' future professions, and provide authentic learning environments (Zanko et al., 2011). In keeping with recommendations made by industry respondents, students should be encouraged to make use of more volunteering opportunities to gain experience and exposure. Existing research supports this as it has found that volunteering as a form of engagement affects students' future career choices, encourages inner reflection and change, improves communication abilities, assists with stress management, changes students' world views, and improves knowledge of the industry (Harlow & Pomfret, 2007; Lo & Lee, 2011; Pan, 2014). Student respondents who were employed showed more negative perceptions of the extent to which universities prepared them for the workplace, implying that once students begin their careers in the industry, they find a mismatch between university and industry. Despite this, employed students noted that their university experience did assist them with their career development in their chosen field.

According to the study results, industry role-players generally held the perception that industry engagement in tourism and hospitality is vital for students to enhance employability, promote work readiness, and ensure the sustainability of the industries post-pandemic. This is in keeping with the triple helix model presented above, which highlights the relationship with government, industry and the university and the UEC model, which focuses on cultivating innovative graduates with a high level of practical skills. An effective approach to improving industry engagement across South African higher education institutions with tourism and hospitality offerings is to build such activities into the existing curricula from the first year of study and to move past the traditional methods of only having industry engagements in the form of WIL modules. Industry respondents supported this by suggesting that types of collaboration include internships, projects, simulations, case studies, research collaboration, events, site visits, guest lectures, seminars, entrepreneurship incubators, student-run enterprises, practical industry certifications, mentoring, career expos, volunteer work, bursaries, practical work, hosting students at organizations, alumni events, round tables and community initiatives. The challenges identified by industry included a lack of well-defined collaboration goals, poor coordination of engagement activities, poor communication, lack of organizational resources, lack of time, high student numbers, inadequate staff numbers, lack of funding, bureaucratic processes, lack of interest and behavior of students and non-alignment of interests. These are in line with those of a similar study conducted in the Caribbean Islands in which industry representatives found engagement with students to be challenging as a result of lengthy processes, lack of common interests between partners, limited curriculum space and difficulty in selecting the right students for the right positions (Lewis, 2006). Industry engagements can become challenging to manage as relationships between universities and industry partners are often only surface level,

and industry staff might not have a clear understanding of academia and academics might not have a clear understanding of the industry (Solnet et al., 2007). Higher education institution educators and industry partners should work together closely in the planning and execution of collaboration activities to overcome these challenges and forge longstanding partnerships rather than ad hoc plans.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations within the tourism and hospitality industries are demanding new competencies of graduates, such as improved technological skills. Technology is widely considered the core of the changed tourism and hospitality industries through tracing apps, robotics, artificial intelligence, digital passports, crowd control technologies, sterilizing systems, and providing safety and security (Sigala, 2020). Industry key informants stated that technology is a tool that can be used to prepare students for the unknown. Therefore, it is essential that students are trained on how to use various forms of technology, systems, and platforms. Additional recommendations that were made relating to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic were that students be trained in adaptability and hybrid working environments; increased focus be placed on innovation and entrepreneurship; employability training practices become more fluid and can adapt as the requirements of the industry change, and emphasis be placed on positive personality traits and soft skills.

The quantitative and qualitative data gathered for the purposes of this research both indicate that tourism and hospitality students and industry members recognize the importance of students collaborating with industry during their studies. Both parties also acknowledge that there are barriers to this collaboration that exist and need to be addressed by the government, industry and universities working together. As most student respondents indicated that they are not employed and do not do volunteer work while studying, industry collaboration is essential to increase their exposure level. This can be conducted using one of the various modes of collaboration suggested by industry partners in the key informant interviews and stated above.

What was not examined in the study is the career readiness and industry-related information that students may have obtained through career centers, libraries, career advisors, information sessions, and via the Internet. The findings and recommendations of the current study can help to ensure that valuable interactive experiences are created between students and industry partners, increasing student satisfaction and ensuring that universities produce graduates that are not only successful employees but also innovative entrepreneurs, resulting in the success of the tourism and hospitality industries in South Africa. Based on the study's findings, South African universities with tourism and hospitality offerings should be consistent in terms of their level of industry engagement, which should form a part of qualifications across the country.

Research on perceptions of industry engagement in tourism and hospitality education has been growing in literature (Morgan, 2006; Busby & Gibson, 2010; Gannon & Maher, 2012; Ezeudiji et al., 2017). These studies indicate that despite the perceived challenges to engagement that both students and industry partners express, these engagement activities are essential for increasing graduates' employability and instilling in them the competencies necessary for success in the tourism and hospitality industries. Thus far, there is limited research on perceptions of industry engagement in tourism and hospitality studies in the context of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the pandemic's far-reaching and devastating impacts, changes to the tourism and hospitality industries are inevitable (Assaf & Scuderi, 2020; Dolnicar & Zare, 2020; Karabulut et al., 2020). Higher education institutions' responsibility is to ensure that graduates possess the skills necessary for success in these changing industries and to meet the demands of tourism and hospitality organizations. These skills can be obtained through increased industry engagement throughout the students' course of study. By identifying student and industry perceptions of industry engagement in tourism and hospitality studies during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study provides new theoretical and empirical evidence on the topic under investigation.

6. Conclusion

Industry engagement and experiential learning are widely considered vital in tourism and hospitality studies. Tourism and hospitality education is designed to educate students to gain the necessary professional knowledge and skills required to enter these industries. Tourism and hospitality educators are responsible for providing students with workable application opportunities to integrate practical and academic information. Therefore, universities must provide students with industry engagement opportunities to bridge the gap between academia and industry. The vast majority of higher education institutions offering tourism and hospitality studies in South Africa feature a certain level of industry engagement in their program offerings. Students at these institutions acknowledge that their universities provide them with industry collaboration activities that help to improve both their hard and soft skills, effectively preparing them for the world of work. Despite this, many already employed students find a mismatch between what universities are equipping them with and what is required of them from the industry. This misalignment of skills can be addressed by the effective collaboration between industry and HEIs. South African tourism and hospitality industry members agree that collaboration is vital for graduates' success and have identified several modes of collaboration that universities can use to enhance the student experience.

As a result of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, quality engagement for students with industry partners in the tourism and hospitality sectors has become increasingly important to ensure the sustainability of the sector and to meet the needs of changing industries. The pandemic has placed a new focus on the soft skills of graduates, which are effectively learned through collaboration exercises. This engagement also exposes students to the changing nature of tourism and hospitality work. Theoretically, this research study broadens and stimulates discussions on COVID-19 and its impact on the tourism and hospitality industries.

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