Research paper

Abstract

Hospitality management competencies: do faculty and students concur on employability skills?

This paper is one in a series of establishing what competencies the various stakeholders (students, industry mentors, faculty) think are the ideal competencies needed by employees in the hospitality field in places such as hotels, food service providers, restaurants and lodges, compared to those actually displayed by hospitality management students. This particular paper reports on a comparison drawn between what the faculty and students believe are the ideal competencies compared to those that they actually have on completion of their academic studies, prior to the students engaging in their semester of work-integrated learning (WIL). The results would be used by faculty to focus on ensuring students are aware of the employability and management competencies they need (Hind, Moss & McKellan, 2007) in order to conduct themselves in the business world of hospitality with confidence and competently.

Key Words: Competencies, hospitality, soft skills, South Africa, work-integrated learning.

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Introduction

In a developing country such as South Africa where the jobless rate is 23.1% of the labour force (4.1 million) (Mail & Guardian, 2008), it is expected that university graduates should be able to find employment but there are many who do not (Ntuli, 2007). The labour market oscillates between the skills shortage on one hand and the number of graduates who are without work on the other. It seems paradoxical that a country with a high unemployment rate, has graduates without work, and that professionals need to be imported or lured to the country. This situation may arise from the fact that students lack employability skills. Behavioural (soft) skills such as those gained through curricula that embed critical outcomes such as analytical skills, teamwork, organize and manage oneself, usually deliver more competent and employable graduates (Coll & Zegwaard, 2006).

Employers have indicated that students are often not prepared for the workplace and call on universities to produce more employable graduates (Barrie, 2006; Kember & Leung, 2005) by providing transferable skills that can be taken into the workplace (Smith, Clegg, Lawrence & Todd, 2007). Students' subject matter knowledge is usually satisfactory (Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick & Cragnolini, 2004; Hind, Moss & McKellan, 2007) but by improving and developing their competencies such as interpersonal skills, teamwork, communication and problem solving skills, value will be added to their intellectual capabilities making them more employable (Hind et al., 2007; Maher & Graves, 2007). Employers are expecting graduates to be work-ready and demanding a range of competencies and qualities of them (Yorke & Harvey, 2005). Educational institutions should be critical of their programme offerings and question if they are nurturing the

appropriate competencies and consider how best to ensure these are developed (Kember & Leung, 2005).

Competencies (the term which will be used in this paper for skills such as soft skills, behavioural skills, generic attributes), that are necessary in any field of work should be an important element in undergraduate programmes (Bath, Smith, Stein & Swann, 2004) and are the responsibility of higher educationalists to incorporate as part of their teaching and learning (Hind et al., 2007). According to Rainsbury, Hodges, Burchell & Lay (2002) the literature suggests that there is insufficient importance placed on the development of soft skills by many higher education institutions. It is not advised that competencies be taught as a form of a check list but be integrated and contextualized into a curriculum (Bath, et al., 2004). Employability skills need to be embedded not only in any one module but must be throughout the curriculum at all levels (Hind et al., 2007). But faculty need to be mindful that attempts to introduce attributes into the curricula have generally been unsuccessful (Barrie 2006).

There are a variety of interpretations of the term competency. It can be viewed as a characteristic of an individual (Zegward & Hodges, 2003) and related to personal attributes rather than technical skills (Hodges & Burchell, 2003). Coll, Zegward & Hodges (2002:36) define a competent individual as "one who has skills and attributes relevant to tasks undertaken". They used Birkett's distinction between "cognitive skills which are the technical knowledge, skills and abilities, whilst behavioural skills and personal skills such as principles, attitudes, values and motives". These terms could also be related to "employability skills" (Hind et al., 2007).

Work-integrated programmes have the purpose of preparing students for the workplace by identifying and developing the important competencies that are believed to be needed by employers (Hodges & Burchell, 2003). Although institutions may have advisory committees

involving industry employers to establish the currency of curricula, discussions are usually about technical skills that should be an outcome of the curricula and not the competencies that students should demonstrate. So it is often not clear what types of students' employers expect higher education to produce (Maharasoa & Hay, 2001).

The vocational nature of hospitality management is ideal to utilize work-integrated learning as a method of transferring classroom activities to the work place. Higher Education institutions offering such programmes have the infrastructure of physical facilities that allow for the teaching of technical skills such as reception proficiency, culinary methods and service to customers, which students will need in the workplace environment. These technical skills are then transferred to the real work environment by the students having a compulsory semester of work-integrated learning (Crebert et al., 2004; Fleming & Eames, 2005). The time spent in real life situations gives students the opportunity to apply abstract concepts learnt in the classroom. The soft skills are handled in a realistic manner rather than trying to simulate opportunities by carrying out role play or similar teaching methods in a classroom experience (Tovey, 2001; Warysazak, 1999).

Faculty are depended upon for quality graduates that they produce and send in to the world of work. Their view on what generic competencies such as analytical thinking, ability and willingness to learn, self-confidence, relationship building was sought in order to compare these with the students' views. Faculty do interact with mentors whilst visiting students in the workplace for WIL assessments and have an indication of what employers expect of graduates. The results from this research would enable faculty to ensure inclusion of these competencies whilst teaching and assessing students. The challenge though is to make students realise how important it is to have generic competencies, how these improve their employment opportunities in a highly competitive market and that they should take ownership of these (Maher & Graves,

2007). They should also be aware of the needs and be able to relate their abilities to those required by employers (Yorke & Harvey, 2005). If students do not see the need or importance, the likelihood of higher education institutions managing to convince students to instill these, will be difficult (Coll & Zegward, 2002).

Methodology

Background:

Work-integrated learning is considered an educational strategy where learning in the classroom alternates with learning in the workplace (Jones & Quick, 2007) and allows for the competencies of students to be developed and nurtured by the mentors. In the lectures preparing the students for their WIL training, assessment of competencies is not included resulting in students not being made intentionally aware of these.

Research objectives

The aim of the study was to ascertain the views of hospitality management faculty and students on what competencies they felt were important that graduates should have and what students actually demonstrated on completion of their formal studies prior to entering their WIL training. The faculty would then use this information to ensure that the employability skills are included in WIL preparation lectures.

Survey instrument

A questionnaire based on the work of Coll, Zegward and Hodges, (2002); Zegward and Hodges, (2003), Coll and Zegward (2006) was compiled. The survey instrument comprised two sections: Section A gathered background information of the participants and section B introduced the definitions of the twenty four competencies (appendix 1) to ensure similar interpretation by all respondents. Respondents were asked to rate these according to a four-point Lickert scale (no

extent, to some extent, moderate extent and very large extent). The instrument was used to draw comparisons between what are **ideal** competencies and **should** be displayed to what the final year hospitality management students **actually do demonstrate (real)** compared to what hospitality management faculty thought students **should** have and **actually** demonstrate immediately before the students start their semester of work integrated learning (WIL).

Results and discussion

The instrument was handed to all of the sixty five final year Hospitality Management students at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) during their final workshop of WIL preparation, prior to them starting their practical semester in the work place. They had already experienced a semester of on-site WIL during their second year of study, having worked in the hotel school restaurants and kitchens. These students would be completing their three year National Diploma. The questionnaires took about 15-20 minutes to answer and were collected immediately on completion, which resulted in a 100% response rate.

The same questionnaire was distributed electronically to hospitality management departmental heads requesting them to distribute these to their lecturers (faculty) at seven public and two accredited private Hotel Schools in South Africa. The returns were low and a second electronic request was sent as a reminder. Twenty six faculty members completed the instrument. The response of twenty six was very small, a response rate of 29%, and is considered a limiting factor. In both cases an appropriate covering letter was attached explaining the purpose of the study.

Internal consistency of both the ideal and the real scale are satisfactory with Cronbach's alpha of 0.888 and 0.959 respectively.

Data analysis

Paired samples:

A paired-samples t-test was performed to compare the ideal competencies verse real within the two groups (faculty and students) respectively. In both the cases of faculty and students, there was a significant difference between the ideal and the real with the mean for the ideal being much larger than the real in terms of gauging competency: Faculty (t(26) = 10.017; p<0.001) and students (t(65) = 5.171; p<0.001). In comparison, there was a much larger gap in the faculty (ideal: M=3.4414, SD=0.28478; real: M=2.4859, SD=0.52575) than in the students' (ideal: M=3.5505, SD=0.31468; real: M=3.3518, SD=0.28727) opinions.

Independent sample:

An independent sample t-test was performed to compare the two groups, that is faculty and students with regards to their ideal and real gauging of competency respectively. The Levene's test for equality of variances was performed for both variables (ideal and real) to test whether the variance of scores for the two groups (faculty and students) is similar. The ideal variable meets the requirements for equal variances however for the real variable this assumption is violated.

For the ideal variable the results suggest that there is no difference between faculty (m=3.436, SD 0.281) and students (m = 3.55, SD= 0.315; t (91) = -1.661, p=0.100). When one compares the top five competencies listed by the two groups, the faculty and students ranked as their top four ideal competencies *customer service, ability and willingness to learn, teamwork and cooperation* and *self-control,* only differing by faculty indicating *flexibility* and students *organizational commitment* as being their fifth respectively.

Comparing what happens in reality there is a difference of opinion of faculty and students. For the real variable there is a significant difference (t (32,644) = -8.072, p< 0.001) between students (m=3.352, SD = 0.287) and faculty (m= 2.49, SD =0.526). From this it is clear that faculty rates

students' real competencies significantly lower than what students rate themselves. The students' top six in order (the last two scored the same) in their opinion are: *ability and willingness to learn, customer service, concern for order, quality and accuracy, teamwork and cooperation,* and *self control* and *organizational commitment.* Faculty believes that students demonstrate the following top seven competencies: *customer service*, followed by *ability and willingness to learn teamwork and cooperation, flexibility,* and equally *organizational awareness*, *initiative*, *interpersonal understanding* and *information seeking.* Although the top listed competencies are similar, the rating that faculty gave to the students regarding what they actually demonstrate for each of the categories was not as high as what the students believe they themselves actually demonstrate. The students' view what they believe as the ideal competencies are little different to what they actually demonstrate as shown in the paired t-test. The similarity could well be due to them having not experienced their final WIL, and could well change if tested at the end of their training (future research). WIL faculty coordinators should emphasise the importance of these soft skills during academic and skills training classes and include these in their assessments in order to make students realise the significance of these for their success for employability.

Comparing this to Zegward and Hodges' (2003) findings of what the faculty thought and the findings of Coll et al., (2002) as well as Rainsbury et als.,' (2002) comments of students' opinions, the one competency that is common to all findings is that of *ability and willingness to learn.* Given that the workplace and technology are constantly changing, it is important that future employees will be able to adapt their actions and thinking to the situation they find themselves in. In a technology driven work environment, students will have to adapt rapidly and be eager to do so.

Flexibility was also rated highly. Faculty regularly remind students that if they are flexible in their attitude and abilities, this will assist in their ability to adapt to change. Faculty and

thankfully the students realize that *customer service* is important, given that the hospitality sector is customer -service driven and both believe that students do demonstrate this competency. The students are assessed in the restaurants and it will be observed how they interact with the customers. *Teamwork and cooperation* was also rated highly by both faculty and students. The results in Coll, Zegward and Hodges (2002) and Coll and Zegward (2003) amongst science and technology students also show this competency to be of importance. In a busy kitchen or restaurant it is imperative that staff work together to ensure that customers receive value for money and an exceptional experience. *Self control* is an important quality for anyone having to work in an environment when working with people and even more so with the public such as customers.

Students on entry to WIL are invariably lacking in confidence but usually by the end of the five month period of training have grown in their demonstration of technical skills but more importantly in their competencies. It has been found that workers do learn by regularly reflecting on the underpinning theory learnt at university and applied during their everyday experiences while in WIL (Gerber, 1998). The importance of WIL being a part of a curriculum in a field such as hospitality management cannot be overemphasized. Students gain valuable experience by way of applying their practical learning in the workplace, develop their skills in interacting with fellow workers, customers and management and discover in which direction they would like to steer their careers (McGlothlin Jr, 2003). WIL has been shown in other research to be of benefit to the students by way of their learning being developed in both technical and competency skills (Fleming & Eames, 2005) and that work-integrated learning had enhanced the development of competencies.

Conclusions

The results of this study undertaken immediately prior to the students entering their WIL training shows that students view the competencies that they should have and those they believe they do have are little different. The faculty on the other hand view the competencies that they should have are similar to the students but their view is that the students actually do not demonstrate these to the same degree. Comparisons with other studies undertaken in New Zealand are similar in certain categories but the students' fields of study differed. These were in the field of hospitality in South Africa and science and technology, as well as business students in the international studies. Hospitality faculty must prepare their students for a highly labour-intensive, customer focused, service industry. The competencies such as *customer service*, *flexibility*, *concern for order, quality and accuracy, teamwork and cooperation* as well as *self control* will allow students to understand how to operate efficiently and professionally in the demanding environment of hospitality

The importance of the work-integrated learning experience cannot be denied as students will be exposed to realities and the competencies that they require in the work place (Rainsbury, et al., 2002). Curricula need to be evaluated for the outcomes to be achieved in WIL and faculty need to be mindful of the competencies that are required when preparing students for the workplace and their employability on completion of their qualifications.

By enhancing their skills, competencies, personal attributes, enthusiasm, self-confidence, and knowledge that are needed in the work place, makes graduates more employable and likely to be successful in their chosen careers, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. During this time, through the guidance of the mentor and the opportunity to actually work in a work environment the students will learn how to work with people, develop communication skills and learn how to get things done (Pratt, unknown). However it is essential

that higher education be responsible to provide its graduates the skills to be able to operate professionally within the work environment (Vignali & Hodgson, 2007).

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Appendix 1

COMPETENCY DESCRIPTIONS (Coll & Zegward, 2006)

Teamwork & cooperation (fosters group facilitation and management, conflict resolution, motivation of others, creating a good workplace climate)
Flexibility (adaptability, perceptual objectivity, staying objective, resilience, behaviour is contingent on the situation)
Relationship building (networking, establish rapport, use of contacts, concern for stakeholders e.g. clients)
Computer literacy (able to operate a number of packages and has information management awareness)
Conceptual thinking (pattern recognition, insight, critical thinking, problem definition, can generate hypotheses, linking)
Technical expertise (job related technical knowledge and skills, depth and breadth, acquires expertise, donates expertise, attention to detail)
Organisational awareness (understands organisation, knows constraints, power and political astuteness, cultural knowledge)
Concern for order, quality & accuracy (monitoring, concern for clarity, reduces uncertainty, keeping track of events and issues)
Impact & influence on others (strategic influence, impression management, showmanship, persuasion, collaborative influence)
Initiative (bias for action, decisiveness, strategic orientation, proactive, seizes opportunities, self motivation, persistence, enthusiasm)
Customer service orientation (helping and service orientation, focus on client needs, actively solves client problems)
Developing others (training, developing others, coaching, mentoring, providing support, positive regard)
Directiveness (assertiveness, decisiveness, use of power, taking charge, firmness of standards, group control and discipline)
Team leadership (being in charge, vision, concern for subordinates, builds a sense of group purpose)
Analytical thinking (thinking for self, reasoning, practical intelligence, planning skills, problem analysing, systematic)
Self control (stamina, resistance to stress, staying calm, high Emotional Quotient, resists temptation, not impulsive, can calm others)
Organisational commitment (align self and others to organisational needs, business-mindedness, self sacrifice)
Ability and willingness to learn (desire and aptitude for learning, learning as a basis for action)
Interpersonal understanding (empathy, listening, sensitivity to others, diagnostic understanding, awareness of others' feelings)
Self confidence (strong self concept, internal locus of control, independence, positive ego strength, decisive, accepts responsibility)
Personal planning and organisational skills
Written communication
Information seeking (problem definition, diagnostic focus, looking deeper, contextual sensitivity)
Achievement orientation (task accomplishment, seeks results, employs innovation, has competitiveness, seeks impact, aims for standards and efficiency)
Values, ethical and social sensitivity (knowledge of values, ethical issues and standards in the discipline)