

GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT IN TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY: ATTRIBUTES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

The tourism sector is often promoted as a significant employment generator. However, critical questions are frequently posed in terms of the nature of tourism employment and the numerous challenges faced by employees in this sector. Despite many employment opportunities being occupied by graduates, the sector is known to have limited potential for employment growth and progression. It is also evident that tourism and hospitality graduates tend to have an inaccurate understanding and unrealistic employment expectations of the sector. This study therefore examines the employment traits and challenges of tourism and hospitality graduate employees. A quantitative research design was utilised for the study, and a structured online questionnaire was used to collect empirical data from 133 tourism and hospitality graduates. The graduates were selected from a University of Technology using a stratified random sampling technique. SPSS was used to analyse primary data and generate descriptive and inferential statistics. The key findings of the study revealed that most respondents were currently employed in the tourism and hospitality industry on a full-time basis, many of whom found employment immediately and easily after the completion of their studies. Compared to the tourism and hospitality sector, graduate employees earned higher incomes in other employment sectors. Moreover, it was evident that graduates employed in the tourism and hospitality sector were faced with far more challenges than those that were employed in other industry sectors.

Keywords: hospitality, tourism, graduates, employment, challenges

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), the tourism sector generated approximately 330 million jobs globally in 2019, and these figures include, direct, indirect and induced employment [1]. The WTTC [1] confirms that one new job is created for every 30 new tourists to a destination, and further estimate that the share of tourism employment will grow by 2.5% a year, generating 414 million jobs by 2029. Santos and Khan [2] concur that tourism is among the world's largest job generators, and its share of world employment is greater than that of the motor-vehicle and chemical industries. Overall, international tourism and hospitality has been widely regarded as a rapidly growing, labour-intensive industry that makes a considerable contribution to employment generation [3]. Thus, a critical element in the success of this industry is the availability of high-quality employees, with relevant skills and education, to deliver, operate and manage tourism products.

Despite the growth in tourism employment worldwide, the sector has been faced with the challenge of attracting and retaining quality employees, resulting in a scarcity of skilled staff to meet the needs of an increasing number of tourism-related businesses [4]. Many graduates do not enter the sector for employment due to inaccurate expectations and perceptions of the industry [5]. Conventionally, a particular work-life philosophy was adopted by employees, whereby they would spend all their working life in one sector or just one organization [6]. This practice has recently been replaced by a new generation of employees who possess unstructured career paths, and generally change employers within one industry sector, or pursue work in different industries [7]. Consequently, many businesses in the tourism and hospitality sector encounter numerous challenges in successfully recruiting and retaining new employees. Also, several studies have also found that a fairly large number of tourism and hospitality graduates are unenthusiastic about a career in the sector due to low job satisfaction, poor working conditions and the absence of motivating factors [8; 9; 10].

Critical questions are therefore posed in terms of the nature of tourism employment and the numerous challenges faced by employees in this sector. Despite many of employment opportunities being occupied by

graduates, it seems that these graduates tend to have an inaccurate understanding and unrealistic employment expectations of the sector. In light of the above assertions, this study was conducted amongst South African tourism and hospitality graduate employees to examine the employment traits and challenges that they encounter, in order to augment the literature on this issue. This paper focuses on some of the key findings of this study and has the following structure: literature review; methodology; results and discussion and conclusion and recommendations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The tourism and hospitality industry provides numerous prospects for well-qualified people aiming at international career opportunities and career possibilities that are easily compared to other industry sectors [11]. Bahceterli and Sucuoglu [12:1137] maintain that with the wide range of constituent tourism subsectors, "employment in tourism is intrinsically co-related to each other". Research confirms that the tourism and hospitality sector plays a key role in supporting the development of local and regional economies and reduces income inequalities through employment opportunities, and the sector supports work opportunities for "disadvantaged sectors of the population such as young people, first-time labour market entrants, migrants, low-skilled workers and women" [13:125].

Even though the tourism industry is regarded as an industry that produces considerable employment opportunities, the type of employment available in this sector is constrained due to a lack of adequately educated and trained personnel, which has been the major determinant mitigating the positive gains and economic benefits of the industry [14]. The tourism industry has opened many doors for employment [15], and "employees who are well educated, well trained and skilled, continue to be a highly desirable source of talent in today's tourism and hospitality job market" [16:64]. Kuslvan and Kuslvan [17:261] also allude that "the importance of a well-educated, well trained, skilled, enthusiastic and committed workforce cannot be underestimated for the service industries in general". Researchers further argue that education and training may assist employees to effectively handle an increase in responsibilities and duties, and this will lead to employee satisfaction and a low staff turnover rate [18;19]. Moreover, education and training will help an establishment remain one step ahead of their competitors in terms of employee skills and guest satisfaction [15].

However, despite the tourism industry being a generator of employment opportunities, several researchers associate employment in the tourism and hospitality industry with numerous challenges such as low salaries, high staff turnover, seasonal employment, poor working conditions, long working hours, and uncertain career paths [10; 17; 20; 21]. Additionally, working in the tourism and hospitality sector does not always guarantee opportunities to support a decent career, and might involve working during public holidays, weekends and even at night; this makes the industry unattractive to professionals and suitably qualified individuals. The sector is, therefore, known for its inconsiderate practices towards employees which has negative consequences for attracting, recruiting, and retaining employees [9]. Studies confirm that wages and salaries earned by employees in the tourism sector are relatively lower compared to other sectors, and suitably qualified employees are leaving the tourism sector due to low salaries and job competition [8; 22]. Potential tourism and hospitality employees found that the industry is initially considered as glamorous and rewarding, but the evidence of low paying salaries becomes a reality once they join the sector [23]. Tourism employment is also characterized by long working hours and unfavourable family shift patterns, as the nature of the industry constitutes irregular working hours, shifts and working during weekends and public holidays, resulting in reduced hours spent with their family [18]. Also, a fundamental characteristic of the tourism sector is seasonality, which greatly influences employment and unemployment in the industry. Employment in the tourism and hospitality industry is determined by seasonality, which promotes irregular employment conditions [22]. Consequently, workers usually need to seek other jobs or remain unemployed during the low season [24]. Low skills are seemingly aligned with the actual practical requirements of the tourism sector. The UNWTO [25] asserts that the tourism industry plays an integral role in providing employment opportunities for low-skilled ethnic groups, migrants, unemployed youth, the long-term unemployed and women seeking part-time jobs. The sector has opened many doors for employment, compared to other sectors, even though there are still few women who are occupying managerial positions compared to their male counterparts [15].

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a quantitative approach with the target population comprising of tourism and hospitality graduates from a University of Technology in South Africa. To obtain a sampling frame for the study population, a comprehensive list of all graduates, who graduated between 2004 and 2014, was obtained from the relevant department. Table 1 depicts the sampling frame, according to year of graduation, and shows the population composition of 475 graduates in the tourism programme and 208 in the hospitality programme. From

the sampling frame of all tourism and hospitality graduates, a stratified random sampling technique was used to draw a sample from each programme. The total sample consisted of 77 tourism graduates and 56 hospitality graduates, comprising a total sample size of 133 respondents.

Table 1: Population and sample

Year	Total number of graduates		Number of graduates who participated in the study	
	Tourism	Hospitality	Tourism	Hospitality
2004	29	5	4	2
2005	49	22	4	2
2006	23	21	3	2
2007	34	22	6	4
2008	29	26	6	5
2009	31	21	4	1
2010	32	6	7	3
2011	58	13	3	6
2012	57	26	7	6
2013	62	18	17	15
2014	68	28	16	10
Total	475	208	77	56

The graduates were contacted telephonically, and their permission was obtained to participate in this study. Data was collected using online surveys that was sent via email, to all graduates who accepted the invitation to participate in the study. The structured, Internet-generated questionnaire was formulated on Google Forms. Key themes that were addressed in the questionnaire included information on respondent's qualification and their current employment situation, as well as the challenges experienced with their employment. The questionnaire was accompanied by a covering letter specifying the purpose of the study and assured the respondents of their anonymity and that their participation was voluntary.

The survey data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 26. The questionnaire primarily consisted of Likert measurement scales and the internal reliability of the measurement scales was measured using the Cronbach Alpha coefficient (α). Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, mean values, and standard deviations were used to describe and summarize the data. Moreover, inferential statistics (chi-square analyses) were used to determine the association between variables. Assuring the anonymity and confidentiality of respondents was imperative for this study, and hence the study followed the regulations and guidelines stipulated by the Research Ethics Committee of the selected University of Technology that formed part of this study. Ethical clearance for this research and permission to conduct the research was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the respective University of Technology.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Characteristics of respondents

The majority of the respondents (71%) were between 21 to 30 years old, and most of them received their qualifications between the years 2011 and 2014. Overall, 59% of respondents were female, which coincides with research confirming that females tend to dominate the student population of tourism and hospitality programmes, and more females are inclined towards opting for tourism and hospitality as a career than males [26]. Seventy-six percent of respondents indicated that they had a diploma whilst 24% obtained a post-graduate qualification in tourism and hospitality. Most graduates sought employment immediately after completion of their undergraduate degrees, possibly due to economic reasons, and only a minority undertook postgraduate studies.

4.2 Reasons for choosing to study tourism and hospitality

Table 2: Reasons for choosing to study tourism and hospitality (n=133)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean
No access to other courses	17%	17%	9%	28%	29%	2.66
To gain transferable skills	16%	54%	23%	6%	1%	3.80
Opportunities for further training	22%	50%	21%	6%	1%	3.88
Growing industry	26%	50%	14%	10%	0	3.93

Secure employment	17%	60%	17%	4%	2%	3.88
Good starting salary	11%	42%	33%	14%	0	3.51
A number of job opportunities	41%	41%	12%	5%	1%	4.16
To gain professional skills	41%	40%	15%	3%	1%	4.17

Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with the reasons for choosing to study tourism and hospitality on a 5-point Likert scale, with 5 being 'strongly agree' and '1' being 'strongly disagree'. According to the data in Table 2, the main reasons for choosing to study tourism and hospitality were to gain professional skills and knowledge (Mean=4.17), availability of numerous job opportunities (Mean=4.16), tourism is a growing industry (Mean=3.93), opportunities for further training (Mean=3.88) and to gain transferable skills (Mean=3.80). To a lesser extent, respondents indicated that a good starting salary (Mean=3.51), and the fact that they could not gain access to other courses (Mean=2.66), were reasons for choosing to study tourism and hospitality.

Respondents were somewhat accurate in stating that studying tourism and hospitality will help them gain professional skills. Personal skills and social skills such as problem-solving skills, critical thinking, creativity, teamwork and liberal reflection capacities, are main skills that tourism and hospitality students are taught so that they can be competent in their jobs and be able to deal with different work situations, effectively [27]. The availability of job opportunities is also a justifiable reason for studying tourism and hospitality, and the WTTC [1] confirmed that tourism supported about 292 million jobs throughout the world. Moreover, Statistics South Africa [28] claimed that in 2019, the South African tourism sector generated 31 752 new jobs.

Respondents also indicated that one of the reasons for choosing to study tourism and hospitality was to get opportunities for further training. Numerous hotels, such as the Tsogo Sun Hotel Group in South Africa, currently supports skills training and further development through various government initiatives and tertiary education providers, by offering in-service training placements for learners who have completed the theoretical component of their qualification, to further train them towards the attainment of practical skills [29]. The Sun International Hotel Group, which has accommodation establishments in South Africa, also offers further career development training opportunities to graduates and offers graduate internships and jobs. The group was named as a top employer in the leisure category by the South African Graduates Employers Association in their employer's awards in 2016 [30]. This a clear indication that the tourism and hospitality industry has several opportunities for further development through education and training, which has become an incentive for pursuing tourism and hospitality qualifications and careers.

A good starting salary was, to a lesser extent, cited as a reason for choosing to study tourism and hospitality. Across the world, researchers and policymakers associate employment in the tourism and hospitality industry with low salaries [17; 20]. Pizam (31:155) also alludes that in many countries, salaries in the tourism and hospitality sector range "between 15% and 20% below the average for other industries". The data also reveals that, although most respondents (62%) confirmed that a tourism and hospitality qualification was their first career choice, 38% indicated that it was not their first choice, and they chose to study hospitality and tourism purely because they could not gain access to other programmes. These results concur with that of Ramakrishnan and Macaveiu [32] who found that tourism and hospitality qualifications have lower entry levels at tertiary institutions than other disciplines such as economics and business studies, thereby forcing many students to take the tourism and hospitality programme due to lack of choice.

4.3 Employment characteristics

The study found that 62% of respondents were employed in the tourism and hospitality sector and 29% were employed in other sectors. After completion of their qualification, respondents may have looked for employment in other sectors, as they could not obtain suitable employment in the tourism and hospitality sector. Another reason could be that respondents may have moved from the tourism and hospitality sector to other sectors. Similar research findings reveal that most tourism and hospitality graduates do not join the industry after finishing their studies with some leaving the industry due to various reasons [33].

Table 3: Employment status of respondents

	Employment attributes	Percent
Employment sector (n=133)	Tourism and hospitality	62
	Other sectors	29
	Unemployed	9
Full-time employment	Tourism and hospitality	71

(n=121)	Other sectors	86
Time taken to find employment after graduating (n=121)	Immediately	66
	1-2 years	25
	More than 2 years after	9
Ease of obtaining employment in tourism and hospitality sector (n=82)	Very difficult	21
	Difficult	25
	Easy	31
	Very easy	23

The data also revealed that 71% of respondents were in full-time employment, whilst 29% worked part-time. With regards to those employed in other sectors, 86% are in full-time employment, and 14% are in part-time employment. Full-time employment is dominant in other employment sectors compared to the tourism and hospitality sector. Full-time employment has many benefits such as pensions, medical cover, sick-leave and other benefits that are important for employees as they enhance the employee's commitment to the organisation and reduces chances of employees leaving the organisation [7]. However, the tourism and hospitality industry is greatly influenced by the impacts of seasonality and part-time employment [18], which has led to an increase in part-time employment [34]. In some cases, this does not only refer to operational employees in the tourism and hospitality industry but also the management staff. Most respondents indicated that they obtained employment immediately after graduation, and 25% indicated that they obtained employment between 1-2 years after graduation. Concurrent with this, a little more than half of the respondents (54%) indicated that it was relatively easy to obtain employment whilst 46% stated that they experienced difficulties in obtaining employment in tourism and hospitality. Often, in addition to the requirements for competencies of tourism and hospitality graduates, many employers require work experience in the sector as a mandatory condition for hiring a university graduate. Based on this, graduates may not immediately obtain employment in the tourism and hospitality sector.

Table 4: Cross-tabulation: Tourism and hospitality as a first career choice by sector employed (n=121)

Tourism and hospitality qualification first career choice	Sector employed		X ²
	Tourism and hospitality	Other	
Yes	71%	47%	.006*
No	29%	53%	
Total	100%	100%	

*Significant values (p<0.05) Chi-square analysis

Table 4 depicts a cross-tabulation between respondent's first career choice and the sector in which they are currently employed. Most respondents (71%) who chose a tourism and hospitality qualification as their first career choice, are still employed within the tourism and hospitality sector, whilst the majority (53%) of those who did not choose tourism and hospitality as their first career choice, are working in other industry sectors. Correspondingly, the Chi-square results reveal a significant association between the tourism and hospitality sector employed and tourism and hospitality as a first career choice where $X^2(1, n=120) = 7.43, p = .006$.

Table 5: Cross-tabulation: Monthly income by sector employed, number of years in tourism employment and gender

		< R5000	R5001 to R10000	R10001 to R15000	R15001 to R20000	> R20000	X ²
Employment sector(n=133)	Tourism/hospitality	31%	23%	18%	22%	6%	.049*
	Other	18%	8%	35%	31%	8%	
Years employed in the tourism sector (n=121)	< 1 years	56%	13%	6%	19%	6%	.013*
	1 to 3 years	30%	26%	22%	20%	2%	
	4 to 6 years	7%	21%	29%	36%	7%	
Gender (n=121)	7 to 10 years	0%	40%	0%	20%	40%	.270
	Male	18%	21%	24%	29%	8%	
	Female	41%	24%	14%	16%	5%	

*Significant values (p<0.05) Chi-square analysis

The data displayed in Table 5 confirm that salaries for the tourism and hospitality sector are lower compared to salaries earned in other sectors. Slightly more than half of the respondents employed in the tourism and hospitality sector (54%) earn up to R10 000 per month compared to those in other sectors (26%). Earnings of more than R10 000 per month is more evident for other sectors (75%) compared to the tourism and hospitality sector (46%). The Chi-square results reveal a significant association between monthly income and the employment sector where $X^2(10, n=132) = 17.24, p=.049$.

The data also confirms that salary increases in the tourism and hospitality sector are dependent on the number of years in employment. A higher percentage of respondents that worked for more than four years in the sector, earned salaries of R15 000 and above per month, whilst many respondents who worked for less than 4 years in the sector, earned less than R15 000 per month. Most respondent (86%) that worked for 3 years or less received incomes up to R5 000 per month. The Chi-square results confirm a significant association between monthly income and the number of years employed in the tourism and hospitality sector, where $X^2(30, n=81) = 48.96, p=.013$. Graduates that enter the tourism and hospitality employment sector, must, therefore, acknowledge that salary scales are highly dependent on the years of experience.

Table 5 also displays the data on the cross-tabulation between the monthly income of respondents currently working in tourism and hospitality by gender. Overall, the data confirms that males earn a higher salary compared to females. Most females (41%) earn up to R5 000 per month, compared to males (18%), and a higher proportion of males (61%) earn more than R10 000 per month compared to females (34%). The tourism and hospitality industry in developing countries began to offer cheaper services compared to developed countries, and offers the largest employment opportunities to women in third world countries compared to other industries [35]. However, females are still faced with challenges of being poorly remunerated compared to their male colleagues who are doing the same jobs within the sector. Moreover, the remuneration benefits that are assigned to jobs that are desirable for females have traditionally been lower than those that are defined for males [36]. Research concurs that some characteristics specific to the industry are indicative of the relevance of occupational imbalance, as most jobs in this sector "carry a certain stigma due to their association with a submissive nature and is regarded in many cultures as suited more for a woman", and that "employers want cheap labour, and women have historically been available for employment at lower average wages than men, partly reflecting their status as a family component rather than as breadwinners" [13:94]. Furthermore, there has been a significant shift in the gender composition in tourism and hospitality employment and this could have led to more females taking tourism and hospitality education as their career choice because of the increased employment opportunities for women compared to men.

4.4 Employment challenges

Table 6: Cross-tabulation: Level of agreement with challenges faced in current employment by sector employed (n=121)

Employment challenges	α	Mean (Hospitality/Tourism)	Mean (Other sectors)
Poor wage/salary	.871	4.07	3.08
Long working hours	.862	3.98	3.18
Lack of promotional opportunities	.860	3.88	3.39
Family life negatively affected	.870	3.50	2.88
Limited or no fringe benefits	.868	3.67	2.82
Heavy workload	.868	3.74	3.10
Work is often part-time/seasonal	.875	3.21	2.33
Lack of work incentives	.874	3.40	3.04

Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with the challenges they faced whilst employed in the tourism and hospitality sector on a 5-point Likert scale, with 5 being 'strongly agree' and '1' being 'strongly disagree'. Internal reliability of the measurement scales was appraised using the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient (α), and the overall Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.883. Moreover, the individual item measurement scales demonstrate high internal reliability and consistency, with all items having a reliability coefficient value above the acceptable limit of 0.7. The data confirms that the lack of promotional opportunities is viewed as the greatest challenge for employees in the tourism and hospitality sector (Mean=3.88) compared to other employment sectors (Mean=3.39). Tourism and hospitality graduates are leaving the industry or even fail to enter the industry due to insufficient promotional opportunities [23]. The data also divulges that the negative impact on family life is considered a major challenge for tourism and hospitality employees (Mean=3.88) than for employees in other sectors (Mean=2.88). There is an "unhealthy acceptance of long working hours",

especially in the service industries of tourism and hospitality, and "these hours are unsocial and often mean that there is little flexibility in the way that employees conduct their social and family lives" [37:99]. Limited or no fringe benefits was another challenge for employees in the tourism and hospitality sector (Mean=3.67) compared to other sectors (Mean=2.82). Most tourism and hospitality students do not join the industry immediately after they completed their qualification because of different reasons, such as the nature of work and employment fringe benefits [33].

A heavy workload was viewed as another challenge for employees in the tourism and hospitality sector (Mean=3.74) compared to other sectors (Mean=3.10). Employees in the hospitality industry often have a heavy workload, with long and irregular working hours which is synonymous with exploitation [18]. Most employees in the tourism and hospitality sector (Mean=3.21) cited the part-time and seasonal nature of work as a challenge, compared to employees in other sectors (Mean=2.33). The tourism and hospitality industry employs a higher number of part-time, seasonal and casual labour than other tourism industries, and this heightens risks of repeatedly higher labour turnover and imposes increased organizational costs due to on-going recruitment and training [25].

Lack of work incentives was cited as an added challenge for employees in the tourism and hospitality sector (Mean=3.40) compared to employees in other sectors (Mean=3.04). Several authors also claim that an increase in employee turnover, generally demonstrates a lack of employee loyalty, as employees are optimally motivated by increased wages and tangible incentives such as competitive salaries and incentives, that make employees loyal and encourages them to stay with the company for a long time; and the tourism sector suffers from low retention of graduates as young people typically exit the sector after a couple of years [8; 14; 38]. Furthermore, employees may consider graduates with a degree as over-qualified and may expect them to start at the bottom of the organization, and work themselves up to reach management level, resulting in graduates moving to other sectors that value their potential and help speed up their career progression.

Table 7: Chi-square analysis: Challenges in tourism and hospitality employment by age, gender, employment duration and employment status

	Age	Gender	Employment duration	Employment status
Poor wage/salary	.570	.034*	.093	.002*
Long working hours	.624	.714	.979	.534
Lack of promotional opportunities	.558	.135	.292	.001*
Family life negatively affected	.183	.390	.193	.086
Limited or no fringe benefits	.670	.306	.036*	.167
Heavy workload	.008*	.228	.349	.324
Work is often part-time and seasonal	.941	.845	.096	.615
Lack of work incentives	.301	.349	.172	.336

**Significant values (p<0.05) Chi-square analysis*

A chi-square analysis was undertaken to ascertain the association between workplace challenges and age, gender, employment duration, and employment status. The data in Table 7 confirms a strong association between heavy workload and age, where $X^2(4, n=81) = 13.66, p=.008$. The tourism and hospitality industry predominantly employs young people under the age of 35 years, of whom half are 25 years or younger [20]. Moreover, majority of young employees in this sector have limited formal training and occupy lower-end positions with fewer career opportunities, and may, therefore, face exploitation by heavy workloads [21]. There was a strong association between poor wages/salaries and gender, where $X^2(4, n=81) = 10.41, p=.034$. Correspondingly other research claims that workers from developed countries tend to do managerial and skilled jobs, whilst employees from developing countries, who are mostly women, are generally employed in vulnerable and labour-intensive segments, such as tourism [22]. This may cause exploitation in the tourism and hospitality labour market. A strong association was observed between limited/no fringe benefits and employment duration, where $X^2(12, n=81) = 22.17, p=.036$, and this corresponds with research which confirms that employees who remain with the same organisation for more than 10 years were entitled to a pension scheme or retirement benefits [39]. Lastly, strong associations were found between poor wages/salaries and employment status [$X^2(4, n=81) = 16.89, p=.002$], and lack of promotional opportunities and employment status [$X^2(4, n=81) = 18.71, p=.001$]. Research supports these findings that part-time workers tend to have fewer privileges compared to full-time workers, and this offers several benefits to companies in their attempt to reduce business risks [40].

5. CONCLUSION

The study found that numerous respondents are employed in the tourism and hospitality sector, on a full-time basis. However, full-time employment was more dominant in other sectors compared to the tourism and hospitality sector. Even though many of the respondents in the tourism and hospitality sector are in full-time employment, it is regarded as a highly seasonal and part-time employer, due to seasonal demands of products and services. Although seasonal employment brings some form of benefits to tourism and hospitality companies, it has adverse impacts on the rate of unemployment. Many respondents obtained employment immediately after the completion of their qualification with over half of them finding it easy. Moreover, higher earnings were evident in other employment sectors, with comparatively lower incomes earned in the tourism and hospitality sector. It was also evident that graduate employees in the tourism and hospitality sector faced many more challenges than employees in other sectors. Most of the respondents in the tourism and hospitality sector indicated that poor wages/salaries, long working hours, lack of promotional opportunities, heavy workloads, limited or no fringe benefits, negative effects on family life, lack of work incentives, and part-time and seasonal work were some of the major challenges that they faced.

To improve the employability and employment conditions of tourism and hospitality graduates, a few recommendations are suggested. Firstly, the tourism and hospitality industry should remunerate employees according to their qualifications and should not base incomes on years of experience. In so doing, the tourism and hospitality industry must also place greater emphasis on formally recognized and accredited academic qualifications, to ensure a qualified and skilled workforce. The industry should work together to develop a formal structure to acknowledge academic qualifications and establish positions and salaries accordingly. Secondly, employers in this sector should comply with government labour laws with regards to the stipulated working hours that state that an employee should work an average of 45 hours a week and extra allowances paid for work during public holidays, weekends, and night-shift work. Attention should be paid to using innovative scheduling techniques to ensure that employees could balance their work and social life. The employer will accordingly benefit from this through reduced staff turnover, lower costs, and higher productivity of the workforce, which will ultimately result in higher profits for the organization. Thirdly, tourism and hospitality managers can also work closely with educational institutions to design suitable internship programmes to improve the students' confidence in tourism and hospitality careers and promote their professional growth. Linked to this, job rotation or cross-training opportunities for students are also encouraged, to help in the professional growth within various departments within the organization. Fourthly, relevant skills and experiences for promotion to higher career paths should be clearly explained to potential employees during job interviews. The provision of a clear promotional framework is recommended to ensure that employees are aware of what they should accomplish to be promoted. This will help employees pursue and develop their careers within the organization. Even when an employment position provides less or no opportunities for further progress, the organization should, at the outset, enlighten potential employees on the reasons to prevent any misunderstanding and poor perceptions in the future.

This research is not without limitations. The main limitation was that the respondents were from one academic institution, and this was due to easy access to student information. Additionally, the sampled population did not fully represent the graduates from institutions offering similar programmes in South Africa and, therefore, the results cannot be generalized. Another limitation was acquiring updated student information. This was due to the residence of some tourism and hospitality graduates in different geographical locations and it was difficult to obtain current contact details and could not be included in the study. Future research in this area should adopt a qualitative approach to ascertain the reasons why graduate employees perceive the industry in a particular way and to explore more detailed career challenges experienced by them. A qualitative approach will help attain a richer understanding of the feelings of the graduate employees and provide an in-depth understanding of their experiences working in the tourism and hospitality industry. Future research should also examine the role of hospitality managers and organizations in addressing the employment challenges in the workplace. An examination of what educators are doing to prepare students to enter the workplace and how realistic expectations are conveyed is also an area for future research.

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