

Exploring the Post-COVID-19 Work Integrated Learning (WIL) Placement Experiences of Hospitality Students

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ABSTRACT

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak disrupted many industries including the hospitality industry. Work-integrated learning (WIL) placement within the hospitality sector was also affected by changes that occurred during the pandemic. The pandemic resulted in the closure of hospitality establishments, enforcement of health and safety protocols, retrenchments and a transformed hospitality work environment. All these changes affected the experiences of students under WIL placement. Accordingly, this study sought to explore the post-COVID-19 WIL placement experiences of hospitality students. The study collected data using the qualitative research methodology. The study population consisted of university students who were enrolled on a hospitality and tourism management course. A purposively selected sample of 20 participants was interviewed using semi-structured providing data on WIL placement experiences in the post-pandemic period. The data were analysed and presented using thematic analysis. The main findings of the investigation revealed that there is a significant change in employment readiness, skills gap as well as career prospects uncertainty. Furthermore, students are facing challenges in handling the transition, dealing with negative career prospects and coping with digital competence requirements. Based on these findings, the study recommends the restructuring of the curriculum to accommodate changes in the hospitality industry, stakeholder consultations regarding WIL placement activities and training to accommodate all changes that affect the efficient delivery of WIL placement within the hospitality industry.

KEYWORDS

Coronavirus; experiences; hospitality; industry; pandemic; placement; students; work integrated learning.

INTRODUCTION

The Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic disrupted several industries throughout the globe including the hospitality industry. The prospective hospitality personnel come from universities that offer hospitality courses. These courses incorporate some form of work-integrated learning (WIL). During the pandemic period, hospitality students who were supposed to participate in WIL encountered a lot of changes. Zegwaard et al., (2020) assert that even though the pandemic was contained within a year or two, the global repercussions have severe and long-lasting effects on WIL practices within the hospitality sector. The pandemic resulted in a decrease in the number of guests and customers who visited hospitality establishments. Additionally, the majority of hotels, restaurants and other hospitality establishments were forced to reduce their operating hours or close during the pandemic period.

Xu et al. (2022) purport that the hospitality and tourism industry suffered significantly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, more especially, due to the social distancing necessity and several prevention and quarantine procedures. More so, due to COVID-19, the hospitality industry experienced multiple talent calamities which manifested through resignations and quiet quitting trends (Liu-Lastres et al., 2023). This crisis of loss of talent in the industry largely affected knowledge and skills provision within the sector. The pandemic also disrupted the flow of transferable skills, proficiencies as well as learning in the hospitality industry. Essentially, the pandemic-induced changes within the hospitality sector affected WIL activities.

Dean and Campbell (2020) argue that the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic delivered an unexpected and substantial driver for rapid transformation and implementation of innovative online WIL training and practices. Additionally, hospitality students who managed to participate in WIL during the COVID-19 period had concerns about their health and safety while working in hospitality settings (Bilsland et al., 2020; lipinge et al., 2020). Shah, Chowdhury and Gupta (2021) also underscore that due to COVID-19 some changes occurred in the hospitality industry requiring technological adaptations and innovations to replace part of human personnel and recruit higher-level skilled manpower for other duties. This situation implied that the normal routine of work-based learning that was used to help students gain insight into the functions within the hospitality industry was interrupted. COVID-19 led the hospitality educational establishments into uncharted territory which saw the abrupt termination of WIL, closure of hotels and transition to emergency online teaching from face-to-face learning (Piramanayagam & Seal, 2023). Therefore, with all these changes that occurred during the COVID-19 period, it is crucial to understand the post-COVID-19 WIL placement experiences of hospitality students.

Piramanayagam & Seal (2023) argue that in the period after the pandemic, scholars have highlighted that the undesirable disruption in the academic process has harmed hospitality graduates' knowledge, attitude as well as soft skills. Prior et al. (2020) purport that after COVID-19 some changes were expected under WIL such as impact on workload and change in roles. In response to the challenges and opportunities caused by COVID-19, WIL has changed to expand beyond placement-based experiences, to incorporate a varied range of practice-based, work-

based, genuine learning experiences (Dean & Campbell, 2020). Zegwaard, Pretti and Rowe (2020) contend that due to changes caused by the pandemic, there is a need to investigate the students' experiences with WIL placement experiences. It is within this context that this paper seeks to explore the post-COVID-19 WIL placement experiences of hospitality students. The main objectives of the investigation are to:

- find out the post-COVID-19 WIL placement experiences of hospitality students;
- understand the post-COVID-19 challenges faced by hospitality students during WIL placement; and
- determine how to assist hospitality students to cope with post-COVID-19 changes during WIL placement.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

COVID-19 disrupted education and the hospitality industry. The period before COVID-19 in the hospitality industry required personnel who had basic soft and hard skills to handle hospitality duties and responsibilities. Collins et al. (2023) contend that due to COVID-19 there are new implementations in the hospitality industry that have to be adapted to hospitality education, therefore, hospitality students have to be ready for the new normal. Bhoola (2022) states that during level 4, restaurants were permitted to seat no more than 50 individuals per sitting. Gomes et al. (2022) also add that with the advent of COVID-19, a lot of restaurants shut down for a period, and others pivoted and started supplying takeaway services as well as home deliveries. Due to the fear of the pandemic, consumers depicted extreme unwillingness to eat out during lockdowns, social distancing protocols, and general restraint towards areas where people assemble (Sung, Hu & King, 2021). Even when the restrictions were lifted, consumers were reluctant to alter their habits (Sung et al., 2021). The literature review focuses on the elements of WIL that might have been affected by COVID-19.

Impact of COVID-19 on Hospitality Education

The COVID-19 pandemic brought an unprecedented impact on education within the hospitality industry. Many hotels, restaurants and other hospitality establishments were closed or reduced operating hours implying that hospitality students got limited opportunities to participate in on-site WIL. Zegwaard et al. (2020) highlight that the pandemic resulted in the temporary closure of tertiary campuses as well as workplaces/host organisations, several active WIL activities either moved online (for example, remote working or remodelling to a new online WIL activity) or were negated. Agyeiwaah et al. (2022) also posit that several hospitality students were not able to entirely attain the practical skills required to improve their academic learning. The experience of doing practical for academic purposes such as wine mixing, food and beverage practical activities, or a front office task has been reduced to an online format (Agyeiwaah et al., 2022). Moreover, the pandemic forced restrictions on access to work settings so students had limited to no chances to experience work placements and at the same time lower university revenues and finances resulted in constraints in the amount of assistance which had additional

effects on fairness and accessibility within the WIL initiatives (Jappie, 2022). The pandemic affected the on-site WIL learning activities. With these disruptions in practical activities within hospitality education, understanding the experiences of students in the aftermath of the pandemic is crucial.

Changing nature of work

The pandemic has changed the nature of work with the hybrid work model becoming common. This new normal became common in many parts of the globe in different industries including the hospitality industry. Jappie (2022) states that the measures taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the speeding up of the transformation of work with large segments of the labour force, previously not affected by growing and steady change, being swiftly obligated into accepting new procedures of working at a distance to coworkers and their place of work. Essentially, employees are getting used to a new norm of being productive working within and outside their work premises. COVID-19 changed the nature of work, temporarily or permanently, showing that work can and is constantly evolving having a ripple effect on WIL activities. Pretti, Etmanski and Durston (2020) argue that WIL initiatives will continue to change to assist students meet the requirements of an increasingly complicated and dynamic work environment and labour force. Therefore, finding out about the experiences of hospitality students in the post-pandemic era helps in understanding the changes that are occurring that need to be considered by education institutions to equip their students.

The pandemic shifted the general perception of health and safety within different sectors including the hospitality sector. Ostrognaj et al. (2023) argue that the pandemic triggered alertness of the significance of health promotion as well as the necessity for more health promotion–training within the work environment. Al-Kumaim et al. (2023) also posit that the major challenge for the hospitality industry is not just following the new governmental protocols but also shifting public opinions on health and safety. The hospitality students who are participating in WIL programmes are expected to be well-versed in and compliant with new health and safety protocols. The students also have to learn of the new expectations of their customers who have different views about health and safety.

Furthermore, the pandemic accelerated digital transformation and the adoption of technology in many industries including the hospitality industry. Al-Habaibeh et al. (2021) assert that the use of technology during COVID-19 meant changing the skills requirements of jobs, which had an effect on both new entrants to the labour market and older employees. The change work meant that students were not only to get work placement opportunities but also faced a possible skillset gap challenge among students in the hospitality sector (Collins et al., 2023). Anjum (2020) highlights the influence of technology and innovation emphasizing that this era is largely dominated by innovations and technological growth as well as rapid digital advancement. Consequently, it is indispensable to cultivate such competencies in students to help them cope with the present work environment (Anjum, 2020). The new work environment in the hospitality sector mandates WIL programs to encompass digital and innovation courses

that equip students for present and future changes. The hospitality industry has gradually adopted technological and innovative methods to deal with the shocks of COVID-19.

One of the major challenges that was worsened by COVID-19 is the stress over career planning and development. A study by Ramgoolam-Atchiamith et al. (2022) found that career development stress is among the main stress elements experienced by hospitality students participating in WIL. Popa et al. (2023) explain that the hospitality industry depends on a pipeline of talent with industry-specific learning, proficiencies as well as skills that can be transferable throughout organisations within the industry. However, COVID-19 disrupted the prospect of career development because job openings were being reduced by the closure of many hospitality establishments. Xu et al. (2022) argue that despite knowing about the association between WIL experience in the hospitality industry and students' career prospects, the expected improvement of multiple skills students has presented a new challenge within the industry. Yilmaz (2020) also pointed out that due to COVID-19 students experienced career shock affecting their career planning. Now that it is the post-COVID-19 period, it is important to obtain the experiences and perspectives of hospitality students who have been involved in WIL on issues such as career planning and development, adaptation to technology, health concerns and hybrid work models.

This study explores experiences that provide information on the relevant skills components that have become imperative in WIL placements in the post-COVID-19 era. To obtain a better of the experiences the research focused on the following objectives which are finding out about the post-COVID-19 WIL placement experiences of hospitality students; understanding the post-COVID-19 challenges encountered by hospitality students during WIL placement due to changes associated with the pandemic; determining how to assist hospitality students to cope with post-COVID-19 changes during WIL placement. Therefore, to understand and elicit information on experiences of post-COVID-19 WIL placement interviews were carried out with students who are enrolled for hospitality and tourism management courses. All the participants who took part in this study were chosen individually for individual face-to-face interviews following the conclusion of their WIL placement. The students were only available for participation after the WIL placement. The methods that were utilised in this study are discussed in the subsequent section.

METHODOLOGY

Using a qualitative research methodology, this study explores the post-COVID-19 WIL placement experiences of hospitality students. The aim is to find out about their experiences and understand the challenges they are facing during the post-COVID-19 era during WIL placement. Therefore, to collect data on the experiences of the participants, the study utilises qualitative research techniques. The study population consisted of students from a South African university enrolled on a hospitality and tourism management course. Before carrying out the study, the researchers sought ethical clearance from the university ethics committee. The study adhered

to scientific ethical guidelines which included informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality.

The selection of the study sample from the study population was done using a non-probability qualitative sampling technique. The purposive sampling technique was useful in identifying students who had been under WIL placement. A sample of 20 students was purposively chosen from a purposively chosen university based on the requirements for this study. The study required university students enrolled on hospitality and tourism management courses who have participated in WIL. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews to elicit insightful detailed WIL placement experiences of hospitality students in the post-COVID-19 period. The research questions were asked using a semi-structured interview guide which allowed probing of any unclear responses. The researchers made sure that every interview was audio-recorded after seeking permission to record the interviews before commencing the interviews. The recorded and safely stored interviews were transcribed, coded, analysed and categorized into themes that were in line with the research objectives. Therefore, the data were thematically analysed using the steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2022). To ensure trustworthiness, the researchers utilised peer debriefing which meant that academic colleagues were asked for critique and feedback. The researchers also made sure that members were checking by sharing with the participants the themes and getting feedback on the accuracy of the data in depicting their opinions and experiences. Additionally, the study used pseudonyms to present the data to safeguard the anonymity of the participants.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study sought to explore the post-COVID-19 Work Integrated Learning (WIL) placement experiences of hospitality students. The study's findings revealed that there are significant alterations that were associated with the effects of the pandemic on WIL practicum placement within the hospitality and tourism sector. The shift has influenced the key experiences of the dynamics and functions of hospitality and tourism placement. The discussion of these findings is presented thematically in the subsequent sections and it is in line with the main objectives of this study. The themes that were identified from the data of this study are discussed to highlight the unique experiences and major alterations that were produced by the post-COVID-19 work environment within the tourism and hospitality sector.

Experiences

The study explored the WIL placement experiences of hospitality students in the post-pandemic period. The experiences of the students who participated in the WIL practicum placement changed as the normal functions were altered to accommodate the changes that occurred during the peak of the pandemic. The changes were notable in the general aspects which have different themes which are employment readiness, skills gap and career prospects uncertainty.

Employment readiness

From the interviews that were conducted, one of the questions on the students' experiences, it was revealed that employment readiness is a vital aspect of WIL placement but due to significant changes that occurred since the pandemic students do perceive themselves as ready for the hospitality job market. Employment readiness depends on how the students understand the job market and their ability to deliver what is expected of them when given duties and responsibilities in their workplace. The preparedness of the students to enter the hospitality and tourism employment market was affected by the changes that were made because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The disrupted work environment meant that some patterns of their jobs which are taught in the academic curriculum were no longer the same. The changes in the hospitality and tourism outlets have forced students to adopt new procedures, some of which are not part of the taught theoretical content. The simplest form of change that was presented in the findings was the requirement to accommodate the enforcement of health and safety measures especially the use of sanitizers at work as a mandatory requirement. Even though the academic curriculum emphasises the need for hygiene and cleanliness, the imperative use of sanitisers and other health and safety measures was not included in the academic curriculum as a mandatory aspect. Additionally, the shift to contactless and virtual processes added to the complexity of working in the post-pandemic era within the hospitality and tourism industry. This situation has affected the employment readiness of students as some of the requirements were not included in the academic lessons. Considering that the students have a limited time to do their practicum placement programs with such a major shift it was difficult to grasp all the necessary experience in the new work environment. The sentiments of the students bemoaning this sudden shift which affects their employment readiness are noted in the responses provided in interviews that were conducted in this study. The students revealed that they feel that in the post-pandemic period, employment readiness is now multifaceted and it is no longer easy for them to be ready for the job market. One of the responses by a participant highlighted that:

“From the WIL placement, I noticed that we are now incorporating a lot of aspects that we are not taught during our lectures. The inclusion of healthy and safe content in work placement activities has made things different for us as students. I think it has added to job requirements, which makes me worry a bit considering that this is not part of the curriculum in our academic institution and I wonder if we will be ready to work in the industry now. For instance some of the issues that were not included in our textbooks such as the mandatory use of sanitisers new for some of us.” (Participant 3).

Another supporting view from another student stated that:

“WIL practicals are important for us. It was a scary period when we were unable to go for practicals because of the COVID-19 pandemic. I was worried about being ready for work. Hospitality courses are vocational they require you to do the work so that you can understand fully what you have been taught in class. However, when we went for practicals I observed that we were now being introduced to how to handle online orders,

crisis management and health-related stuff. Those things are not part of our studies at school” (Participant 1).

The above responses from the students depict the issue of employment readiness. The changes associated with the pandemic are significantly affecting the employment readiness of students in the hospitality and tourism industry. Different shifts mainly consumer behaviour, nature of work and employment opportunity availability are influencing the employment readiness of students within the sector. The pandemic resulted in many people wanting to stay at home due to fear of being infected with the coronavirus. The finding highlights the assertion raised by Sung et al. (2021) that due to the fear of the pandemic, consumers depicted extreme unwillingness to eat out during lockdowns, social distancing protocols, and general restraint towards areas where people assemble. Even when the restrictions were lifted, consumers were reluctant to alter their habits (Sung et al., 2021). This change in consumer behaviour impacts operations and work in the hospitality industry. The work experience during placement will differ due to these changing dynamics. Students obtain valuable experience by dealing with consumers. The services that they provide to customers help the students to learn more about their jobs. However, when the consumers are not dining out or frequently visiting hospitality areas the experience that students gain during WIL placement will be limited. Therefore, this situation of having a reduced number of consumers sitting and dining in the hospitality and tourism industry facilities might permanently affect the WIL placement experience for hospitality and tourism students, especially concerning employment readiness.

Furthermore, with shifting nature of work and workforce in the hospitality and tourism industry will be a complication for employment readiness. As the work was changing some workers were retrenched and put on furlough. These rapid changes imply that some of the experienced staff were replaced or laid off which affects the transfer of some intangible skills that are substantial in the delivery of quality service within the hospitality and tourism industry. The loss of these intangible skills affects the students’ preparedness for the job market leaving them ill-equipped for future job opportunities. The nature of work is now demanding the use of online services which means skilled personnel to the demands of technology. The shift to online services did not necessarily present the students with the opportunity to learn about the different duties and services within the industry as the existing ones were also going through training to understand the new operations. More so, the increase in online services implies that there are off-premise orders. These premise transactions limit the ability to interact with and understand the customers as well as the industry. The learning experience becomes constrained to certain activities which do not completely prepare the students for employment opportunities. This finding confirms the findings of Al-Habaibeh et al. (2021) who assert that the use of technology during COVID-19 meant changing the skills requirements of jobs, which had an effect on both new entrants to the labour market and older employees. The authors also raise concern over the nature of work shifting and posing a significant challenge for the old personnel as well as prospective employees. Therefore, due to the pandemic even after WIL

placement students as prospective employees do not feel confident about their employment readiness as the nature of work within the hospitality and tourism industry is changing.

More so, the availability of opportunities is shrinking due to the pandemic-induced changes making the students feel less confident about employment readiness. The closure of many hospitality and tourism facilities during the pandemic implies that employment opportunities are becoming limited. This new work environment requires highly trained personnel that not have academic qualifications but work experience that allows the provision of seamless experience through quality services. Explaining this point Gomes et al. (2022) assert that with the advent of COVID-19, a lot of restaurants shut down for a period, and others pivoted and started supplying takeaway services as well as home deliveries. The pivoting by hospitality businesses demands the use of step-by-step training procedures which are not offered in academic institutions. This study's data shows that hospitality establishments are already adopting new mechanisms in response to the changes that were induced by COVID-19. However, even though these changes have occurred in some hospitality establishments there is a slight gap between what is required by hospitality establishments and what is being taught in academic institutions. This slight gap has a significant impact on the employment readiness of hospitality students. Therefore, there is a need to review the curriculum in the hospitality discipline for employment readiness by accommodating changes that have been prompted by the pandemic.

Skills gap

Closely linked to employment readiness is the aspect of the skills gap. The interviews conducted in this study showed that from the experiences of the students that have been under WIL placement there are skills gap concerns. The pandemic widened the gap between taught theoretical knowledge and practical work experience. In response to the changes that were induced by the pandemic, most hospitality abandoned or suspended the conventional ways of operations looking for innovative ways to accommodate their customers. These changes were happening rapidly and required the first experience that the students did not get to have. Therefore, the experiences of the students in the hospitality industry vary and the post-COVID-19 period has further complicated the students' experiences especially with regards to the skills needed to successfully execute certain responsibilities. A participant indicated that:

"The period after COVID-19 has required a different mindset and skillsets. I think from the work we did we applied different skills that were not required before. Our manager mentioned that it's now important to have skills such as flexibility, multitasking, cultural awareness, critical thinking, social media and online digital application" (Participant 2).

Additionally, a participant sharing similar sentiments echoed that:

"From our experience in the post-pandemic era, the use of technologies such as chatbots is now becoming a common thing in the hospitality industry and that requires certain types of skills. So, hospitality students as prospective hospitality personnel are going to

have to learn all these things of self-service and how to deal with customers when they encounter problems” (Participant 7).

The excerpts provide insight into the experiences of the students regarding the skills gap issues that have become very substantial in the post-pandemic era. The pandemic presented a complex situation for the students as they were expected to be agile, adaptable and resilient to the changes within the industry. The agility and adaptability of students were crucial in the students to acquire significant skills during WIL placement. The process of the WIL placement experience is supposed to equip the students with skills so that they become marketable in the job market. The shift-like work has affected the ability to transfer some skills acquired by having encounters with different customers. The ability to attain and improve soft or intangible skills depends on the amount of exposure that students have with the various customers. The students can attain skills such as emotional intelligence, confidence and creativity among other skills through the interactions that they have with customers during WIL placement. However, due to changes that have been the pandemic some skills are no longer easily transferred or obtainable as some work activities have become restricted. There is a new way of operations in the hospitality and tourism industry.

Therefore, the study reveals that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the need for some areas to make use of reskilling and upskilling. This finding corroborates the assertion of Al-Habaibeh et al. (2021) that the use of technology because of COVID-19 is changing the skills requirements of jobs. As the use of technology becomes very common in many hospitality establishments the need for reskilling and upskilling becomes imperative. The reskilling and upskilling have to be considered when the academic curriculums are being designed or redesigned to avoid skills mismatch or skills discrepancy. The results of this study show that the students' experiences were affected by inadequacies in soft and hard skills. The soft skills gap that was identified was flexibility, adaptation, critical thinking, multitasking, cultural awareness and creative problem-solving. The hard skills gaps that were noted in this study were digital, crisis management and social media. The gap in skills that are required in the hospitality industry can widen if the taught theoretical knowledge does not match what is required in the changing industry. The post-pandemic work environment is demanding additional and different skill sets. For students under WIL placement, the skills gap affected their experiences during their WIL placement in the hospitality establishments.

Career prospects uncertainty

The interviews on the experiences of the students under WIL placements revealed that there is uncertainty in career prospects within the hospitality industry. As the hospitality and tourism industry transforms to accommodate the changes induced by the pandemic, the prospects for careers become challenging. The new requirements associated with these changes make it challenging for the students who are now required to re-orientate towards the changing work environment. Therefore, the study found the main reasons for the career prospect uncertainty in the hospitality industry after COVID-19 are the introduction of technology, change in business

models, the closing of some businesses and the gap between the academic theoretical knowledge and practical working environment. One of the students said this:

"I think from my experience during WIL placement, I noted that after COVID-19 a lot of things have changed like the introduction of self-service, chatbots and online ordering meaning that shortly some people will not have jobs. Tasks such as responding to customers and taking their orders will be performed by computers. This situation implies that there will be fewer job opportunities and a high likelihood of retrenchment" (Participant 9).

Adding to this view another student quipped:

"It is clear that a lot of businesses closed during the pandemic making it difficult to find opportunities. I struggled to get a WIL placement. When I got the position, I realized that we use a lot of computer-related transactions, social media and chatbots. This is a bit worrying on what it means for us as jobseekers. Most of those skills are not taught at our universities" (Participant 5).

The responses above indicate the uncertainty in career prospects for students in the hospitality industry based on the WIL placement experiences. The uncertainty of career prospects for many students was prompted by the increased use of technology. Even though globalisation has been promoting the use of technology in the hospitality industry, the advent of the pandemic accelerated technological models in the industry. The increase in technology might result in high employee retrenchment as businesses use technology to carry out tasks that are performed by employees. Additionally, the fluctuating furlough patterns in the hospitality and tourism industry are making students who participated in WIL placement perceive career prospects as uncertain. This situation is further worsened by the reduced work experience due to restrictions within the industry. The students began to question the viability of the career opportunities in the industry. Results of this study show that after their WIL placement experience, some students now feel that their career opportunities for graduates in the hospitality industry are decreasing due to the effects of COVID-19. The increased use of online business models is increasing uncertainty and career shocks within the hospitality industry. This finding is in tandem with the argument by Yilmaz (2020) who points out that due to COVID-19 students experienced career shock affecting their career planning. The anxiety and stress associated with aspects such as the closure of some hospitality establishments due to the pandemic affect students' career prospects. The inability to fully participate in full-service duties in the changing hospitality work environment due to pandemic-induced alterations also affects the views of students about career prospects in the industry. Consequently, career prospect uncertainty and career decisions are affected by the major changes that were prompted by the pandemic such as the closing of businesses, the changing of business models, the use of technology and gap between the theoretical education and work practical activities. The career prospect uncertainty is not only affecting the WIL experiences of the students but also hindering the potential career decisions causing a career crisis.

Challenges

The WIL placement experienced challenges resulting from changes which were induced by COVID-19 in the hospitality industry including handling transition, dealing with negative career prospects and coping with digital competence requirements. The challenges that are faced during the placement were prompted by the transitioning industry norms. The students expressed this concern of the different challenges using the following words:

“There are a lot of things that have changed. From what I was told by some of the previous students. I think the way things were being done before COVID-19 is no longer the same. We carried out tasks in different ways. You are worried about work environment safety and also about what happens to the jobs if the industry continues to customers due to health concerns” (Participant 1).

Another participant also shared that:

“I can say a lot has changed. Coping with the changes has been difficult. The application of academic theory to practical things is now limited. Even customers’ feedback has reduced because I remember going to placement thinking that I would get a lot of customers interacting with us and telling us all our faults. To my surprise there are very few that interacted with us” (Participant 9).

The excerpts from the interviews show that there are concerns among students over the changing nature of the hospitality industry. The changes are presenting unprecedented challenges for students who are prospective employees in the industry. The challenges are rooted in the composition of their work as the students are now required to understand the changes that come with the introduction of elements such as technology, reduced customer interaction, and enforcement of health and safety protocols. The factors that are perceived and being presented to students require adjustments. The adjustments require the students to consider multi-skilling to enhance their employment opportunities. The adjustments also demand the academic courses and WIL placement programmes to be restructured to accommodate the various changes that have emanated from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding supports the assertion by Xu et al. (2022) who argue that despite knowing about the association between WIL experience in the hospitality industry and students’ career prospects, the expected improvement of multiple skills students has presented a new challenge within the industry. There is a need for the WIL experience initiative to make sure that the students are multi-skilled and equipped for the hospitality job market. However, the evidence from this study depicts that the students feel ill-equipped, especially concerning being multi-skilled to deal with changes that are occurring in the hospitality and tourism industry. The significant prerequisites of human resource development in the hospitality and tourism industry cannot be overlooked as the pandemic-induced changes in the industry might remain for a prolonged period. The challenges are likely to continue if WIL initiatives and academic programmes are not restructured to match the pandemic-induced changes in the hospitality and tourism industry.

Handling transition

One main challenge that was raised by the study is handling the transition. The pandemic affected the hospitality industry which meant that a lot of elements had to shift. The drastic changes that have emanated from the effects of the pandemic have prompted the need for coping measures that will allow students to be valuable assets in the hospitality and tourism industry. However, the students are not sure about how they can handle the transition. The study's data revealed that students who were under WIL placement experienced challenges in adjusting to changes of accommodating new health and safety measures, hybrid work models and crisis management. Commenting on the complexities that were experienced during WIL placement, a student expressed that:

"The WIL placement after COVID-19 has been challenging because a lot has changed. We are supposed to strictly adhere to sanitation, hygiene and health protocols. There is also the intensive use of technology and flexibility in working with technology. For most of us, it was difficult to adjust to the new work requirements. Also, we didn't get stipend payments unlike before the pandemic. This made it difficult for me to travel to work." (Participant 4).

This view reflects the challenge of handling transition due to several changing dynamics within the hospitality work environment. Handling transition which was enforced by the pandemic requires a shift to sustainable processes and practices. The sustainable processes have to accommodate new health and safety protocols, hybrid business models and crisis management. Students in the hospitality industry have to be able to acquire skills that will ensure that they can execute the required tasks that support sustainable practices and processes within the industry. The demand for students is to ensure that they acquire all the necessary technical and interpersonal competencies that will help them cope with the transitioning hospitality and tourism industry. The transitioning work environment is becoming more complicated requiring the hospitality businesses to recruit personnel that is adaptable to the changes that are occurring since the emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding supports the data by Pretti et al. (2020) that the hospitality industry will become an increasingly complicated and dynamic work environment. Therefore, from the experiences of hospitality students during WIL placement it is evident that the hospitality industry is becoming complicated and dynamic in the post-pandemic era. The handling of the transition from the pandemic period to the new normal after the pandemic has been challenging for WIL placement students carrying out work duties in the hospitality industry. Additionally, the inability to pay stipends by some hospitality establishments is affecting the students' WIL placement experiences. The lack of financial resources is a challenge for students who have to travel to work.

Dealing with negative career prospects

The data from this study shows that WIL placement in the hospitality industry in the post-COVID-19 period has been characterized by a negative perspective regarding career prospects. The

fluctuating furlough patterns, technology and changing consumer behaviour patterns are making it difficult for students to be certain about their career prospects in the hospitality industry. The situation is creating an adverse perception about the prospects of getting a job shortly. Dealing with career prospect anxiety among hospitality students was signalled as one of the challenges that students experienced during WIL placement. The students felt discouraged and uncertain about their career plans, job security in the future as well as possibility of career development. A student retorted:

“One challenge that I think we as hospitality students encountered during our placement is dealing with career prospect anxiety. There are a lot of things that have changed in the industry in the post-COVID-19 period. We were sharing that a lot of hospitality outlets closed, downsized and retrenched workers during COVID. A lot of them did not take back those workers. Instead more technological innovations are being used, so what does it mean for us as future job seekers, our jobs shortly” (Participant 8).

This excerpt depicts the challenges faced by hospitality students in dealing with career prospects and uncertainty during their experience in WIL placements. The students are unsure about their future career path and development due to changes that were caused by COVID-19 such as the shutting down of some hospitality establishments, increase in digital technology and changing business models. The negative perception regarding career prospects is further exacerbated by the likelihood of employment security diminishing due to the introduction of robots and self-service platforms. Additionally, as a service industry, the ability of the personnel to provide seamless service and forge customers is important for the hospitality industry. The students who participated in WIL placement were not able to get full-service experience due to the rapid changes that were caused by the pandemic. The inability to experience all functions within the industry has increased the negative perceptions and anxiety that students have towards career prospects in the industry. The skills capacitation when students are not getting full practical experience for their prospective employment is hampered and that affects the students' perception regarding the prospects of career development. The findings of this study validate the findings of Ramgoolam-Atchiamith et al. (2022) that career development stress is among the main stress elements experienced by hospitality students participating in WIL. Clarity on career prospects and career development largely depends on the involvement during practical work experience. The students feeling less involved in the WIL experience makes them have a negative perception of their prospects in the industry. The students are worried because they are not sure about the chances of career opportunities as they are now restricted to fewer tasks and responsibilities. Furthermore, career opportunities in the industry have become limited and complicated as basic academic education does not provide sufficient knowledge to cover the digital skills required in the new normal working environment within the hospitality industry.

Coping with digital competence requirements

The study also found that there is a challenge of failing to cope with digital competence. The WIL placement revealed the inability of hospitality students to cope with the new demands of digital innovation and competence. The experiences of the students showed that the new working environment which is dominated by hybrid work models has become a complex requirement for hospitality students who do not obtain some of the digital and technical skills from their academic qualifications. The response by one participant illustrated this complication:

“Since the pandemic, there has been an increase in contactless transactions. We have struggled with some of these changes such as the digital coins, payment with zipper QR (Quick-Response) code, point of sale systems and several other changes which are difficult even for some managers. The use of different technologies has been difficult for us because we are not taught some of the things at school” (Participant 14).

From the quotation above, it can be noted that COVID-19 disrupted the hospitality industry as WIL activities. The increase of technology in the hospitality and tourism industry is minimising contact and customer interaction. This new situation that one of the aspects of understanding customer relationships by students who are seeking to gain experience in providing quality service through interaction with customers. The new technological changes that have been encouraged by reduced physical contact during business transactions have affected the execution of duties presenting a challenge for prospective personnel. This finding is in tandem with the suggestion of Anjum (2020) that it is indispensable to cultivate digital competencies in students to help them cope with the present work environment. The changes imply that some sections of the workforce in the hospitality industry will specialize in acquiring special skills that will make them able to handle the complex technical aspects which require specialized knowledge of technology. The other sections of the workforce will be flexible and also multi-skilled allowing them to function in various units within the industry. The WIL placement has to play a critical role in helping students to understand these changes. However, from the study's findings, the WIL placement experiences have shown that the theoretical education provided in academic institutions has become inadequate in equipping students with the necessary digital competence required to fulfil duties in the hospitality industry.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study's main findings are primarily premised on three major themes which are employment readiness, skills gap and career prospect uncertainty. The employment readiness of students in the hospitality industry in the post-pandemic is concerning. Based on the WIL placement experiences, the hospitality industry has changed and handling the transition is a challenge. The main changes that are problematic include the introduction of a hybrid work model, the gap between academic education and work environment, accommodating health and safety protocols and crisis management. In light of this finding, the study recommends the restructuring of the curriculum to accommodate the changes in the hospitality industry.

Results of this study show that the post-COVID-19 has accentuated the skills gap problem within the hospitality industry. Technology and digital competence have become essential in the sector. The rapid introduction of digital innovation in the hospitality industry improves efficiency, for example, the easy payment is done through scanning a QR code from a cellphone or smart-watch. However, there are several challenges associated with such transactions, especially if being handled by semi-skilled personnel, such as wrong transactions, and exposure to online scamming among other things. Prospective personnel have to be adequately prepared to handle responsibilities and duties within the sector that require digital skills. Academic institutions have a role to play in introducing facilities and learning materials that prepare students for the new normal in the hospitality industry. The major recommendation based on the findings is that there must be stakeholder consultations on designing and implementing academic education and WIL placement activities in the hospitality discipline.

The study also uncovered that from their WIL placement experiences, there is a high degree of career prospect uncertainty. The uncertainty associated with the post-pandemic period in the hospitality industry presents a challenge for students, academic institutions and hospitality establishments. The students are unsure about career prospects in the industry because technology such as point-of-sale systems can easily become cashiers. The academic institutions have to structure academic material and activities in a manner that helps the students view the changes in the hospitality industry as prospective opportunities for career security and development. The hospitality establishment has to ensure that enough training is provided to students to ensure efficient WIL placements. Therefore, based on the results of this study, the researchers suggest that more research and training be conducted to equip university personnel, students and hospitality personnel about the changes in the post-pandemic new normal within the hospitality industry.

Limitations and areas of further research

The study only focused on a certain province within South Africa, more studies must be conducted in other provinces and regions to fully understand the changing dynamics of the hospitality industry in the post-pandemic era. There is a need to understand how WIL programmes within the hospitality discipline are being redesigned to accommodate the increasing digital innovation.

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